ALMOST PARADISE

A Paraverse Story

HOLLY DENISE

For OffYourBird, kats_meow, bewildered, Niamh, and Kimmie Winchester.

I

GO ON, GO ON, AND DISAPPEAR. GO ON, GO ON, AWAY FROM HERE

"Be careful what you wish for, you may receive it."

— ANONYMOUS

"UMM, THIS DOESN'T LOOK LIKE IT DID IN THE PICTURES."

Buffy felt her spirits plummet harder, if such were possible, and tried to keep from physically deflating right along with them. Right, because the only thing that could make this day better was a hard-to-please customer who didn't realize that cameras had limitations and salespeople always talked up their products to make money. But this was her job now—at least today—so she had to make it work.

There weren't many ways Anya could still be threatening—but cost her a customer, and Buffy trusted the former demon would find creative means of seeking vengeance.

"I'm sure that was just the lighting," she said in her brightest customer-service voice. Not that lighting could have done much for the hand. It was small, furry, and a bit on the shriveled side. Three fingers were extended, the ring and pinky folded in against the palm, like it had been chopped off in the middle of indicating how much of a certain item it wanted. Or how many minutes to wait. Or maybe how

many siblings it had—there were so many possibilities. In all the severed limbs Buffy had seen, and unfortunately that number was likely somewhere in the triple digits, none had ever been in a fixed pose like this. Maybe that was what made it magic.

"Where are the bandages?" the woman demanded, wrinkling her nose and nudging the thing across the cash wrap counter. "It's not moving, either."

"You wanted a mummy's hand that...moves."

The woman rolled her eyes and gave her a look that women like her had been giving store clerks since the dawn of time. Buffy knew. While she hadn't been old enough to pull it off, she'd once had the teenage-equivalent of that look. A look that came with an attitude that made the world of customer service a nightmare for all retail associates. Now she was gazing into a mirror of what might have been.

"What is the point of a *dead* hand?" the woman asked as though scandalized. "Prosperity spells are tricky enough to get right if you have all the correct ingredients. Whatever *this* is...I don't think this will work."

That did it. Her voice evidently carried loudly enough to have Anya's loss-of-commission radar going off. The next second, the former demon was shoulder-to-shoulder with Buffy, fake smile in place. "Hello," she said brightly. "I am Anya Jenkins, Magic Box proprietor. How may we help you?"

The woman blinked and gave a nervous look around. Come to think of it, she'd seemed a little shifty ever since she'd whisper-shouted what it was she'd come here to buy. "I need a mummy hand for a prosperity spell," she said before lowering her gaze to the thing Buffy had brought up from the lower level. "They are supposed to move, aren't they?"

Anya glanced to the item in question and blanched. "Oh, no," she said, snatching the hand-thingy up in a flash. The smile on her face was now more a grimace, her eyes wide with something Buffy was suddenly certain was alarm. "This—no. Not what you want. Sorry," she added, patting Buffy's shoulder with her free hand. "She's a little...well, stupid. My apologies."

"Hey!" Buffy jerked away, scowling. "She asked for a hand and I found—whatever that is."

"This is not for sale," Anya went on, not taking her gaze off the customer, whose expression now looked closer to curiosity, even interest. "Buffy, follow me please. We need to get this nice paying lady what she came for."

The next thing she knew, Buffy had been shoved through the door that led to the lower level by a very harried Anya, who immediately dropped whatever had remained of her customer-service smile. "A monkey's paw?" she hissed. "Are you out of your mind? Do you have any idea what these things can do?"

Buffy swallowed the immediate response. Obviously, *no,* she didn't know what they could do because she clearly couldn't tell the difference between a mummy hand and a...whatever that was. Twenty minutes into her first day in customer service and she already knew this was not the vocation for her. She took a healthy amount of crap from regular vampires and demons—she really *didn't* need to add Anya to her list of harassers.

"How did you even get it out of its case?" Anya asked when they reached the ground floor. "Giles swore he put a protective charm on it, and if he lied to me on top of bringing one of these things into my shop, I'm going to call the Department of Immigration and have his British butt deported."

Well, there was a lot of questionable information delivered in that sentence. "I don't know. I was just looking around, opening stuff—it is *really* hard to find things down here, by the way. And I opened this thing and it was there." Buffy glanced down at the thing, wrinkling her nose. "What did you say it was?"

"A monkey's paw." Anya took the time to enunciate each syllable, as though the speed at which she spoke was the barrier between Buffy and understanding what the big deal was. "Don't you know anything?"

"About monkeys? No. Even less about paws." She wrinkled her nose and glanced around the storage room. It wasn't a place she'd made a point to visit often, being neither witch nor Magic Box staff. Aside from a few things she'd been forced to hunt out and grab in the year since Giles had bought the place, she'd spent very little time among

the inventory, which seemed more a haphazard collection of assorted crap than anything anyone would want to actually buy. "It took forever to find, too. Are you saying you have more chopped off body parts down here?"

Anya shook her head, sighing hard and striding with intent toward a cupboard pressed against the far wall. "Monkey's paws are extraordinarily rare," she said matter-of-factly, plucked something off the ground—the fancy case, Buffy saw—and shoved the hairy appendage back inside the satin-lined interior. "And dangerous."

"So you've said. Which begs the question, why do you have one, especially if it's not for sale?"

"Because Giles has decided that it's not enough that we sell magical wares to the public," Anya continued, shoving the case back onto a shelf—right between a creepy-looking doll and a bizarre statuette of a naked lady demon with a lolling tongue that would make Gene Simmons jealous. "Anytime he gets wind of a dangerous dark object, he insists on pulling out all the stops—not to mention all of my money—to acquire it." She rolled her eyes and brought up her hands to make air quotes. "To 'prevent potential catastrophes of apocalyptic proportions' or something like that."

Buffy frowned, eyeing the case warily. "So...that thing could set off the apocalypse?"

How? It was so little. Not to mention furry.

"Possibly," Anya replied, walking past her now, focused on something on the other side of the room. "It depends on what one wishes."

"Huh?"

"Monkey's paws grant wishes."

That hardly sounded apocalyptic. Buffy watched as Anya foraged through the inventory, trying and failing to come up with a reason why an item that granted wishes was a bad thing, which she was sure said something about her and her state of mind. Obviously, wishes could go very wrong—Anya herself had been in the trade long enough to tell some truly horrific stories that Buffy could never unhear. But those instances had involved people who either hadn't known they were talking to someone with the ability to bring their wishes to life or hadn't considered the consequences of what they were asking. Such as

the instance that had spawned a universe with a skanky vampire version of Willow. Buffy was vague on the details but knew it had involved Cordelia and a wish gone wonky—one that had been thankfully righted.

Of course, there was also the obvious. If someone wanted to end the world and got hold of a paw, well, that would be a surefire way to do it.

"Just so I know," Buffy asked, wandering toward the shelf Anya was currently pilfering, "how many thingamabobs out there have the ability to grant wishes? Like, are magic lamps a thing? Shooting stars?"

"What?" Anya didn't even bother to look at her, rather scowled and placed another box aside. "Damn mummy hand."

"And how do you keep track? How does anyone? If something that small can make a big kaboom, then—"

"They aren't *common*, Buffy," Anya said, still not looking at her, squatting now to investigate the lower shelf. "I've only ever seen one other aside from that one, and I'm pretty sure the one I saw *was* that one. Three fingers extended, one per wish. There's a scar on the index knuckle that was the same pattern as one of Olaf's birthmarks and unless all monkeys just *come* that way—"

"So magic wishes aren't something I should worry about."

"No more so than you were already." She grunted, then hooted in victory and shot to her feet, a box in hand. "Here we are," she said, thrusting it into Buffy's arms. "One mummy hand. Now go make that sale."

Buffy blinked at the box, her throat dry. "But the monkey—"

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Buffy, don't worry about the monkey's paw. Giles is looking up ways to destroy it, and since I am ninety-nine percent certain it's the same paw I saw in 1158, I doubt wayward wishes cast by a cursed severed primate appendage are worth your concern." She gave the box a little push—and Buffy by association since she was still holding it. "Sell this item. And don't let her talk you down from the sale price. They always try to do that with exotic imports. Now, this has taken up enough of my time. I have an order that must be ready before the nice man from the postal service arrives, so try not to mess anything else up, okay?"

Anya was gone the next instant, rushing back up the stairs at a clip, leaving Buffy feeling a bit railroaded, but nothing was new there. That was just the way things were now, at least when it came to newly not-dead slayers navigating the afterlife, minus the *after* part. Other people got blissful detachment, a sense of utter completion and peace, not to mention the comfort of knowing that their loved ones, despite the pain and turmoil, would be all right. Other people—not Buffy. No, Buffy got well-meaning friends and a one-way ticket out of Heaven so she could resume the life that had rejected her. Get back to the daily grind of avoiding death every night so that her friends could live their lives every day.

That was life. Not what it had always been, granted, but the thing it had become. Instead of freedom, she had this—surfing through magical wares to find enchanted items that did god-knows-what for snot-nosed customers who thought they could magic their way to prosperity. Like Buffy would be working retail if prosperity was a thing she could just *get*.

It wasn't, was it? She'd have to ask Willow. Maybe. If she still cared enough to ask later. Right now, all of her energy was focused on getting through this moment, because the next one would be just as bad.

Buffy shuffled her way toward the staircase, jostling the box under one arm. Then she paused, cast a glance across the room at the other shelf where Anya had stuffed the monkey's paw. She had thought it looked a bit small for a mummy hand, but she'd never seen a mummy hand to make a comparison. If her adventures in the wide world of retail lasted beyond today—fat chance but she wasn't exactly rolling in options—she supposed that was the sort of thing she should know to avoid other goof-ups, of which she assumed Anya would only be so forgiving. Best to get a look down here to avoid the inevitable face she would make upon presenting a paying customer with something ookie.

So Buffy placed the box on a nearby pallet of what looked to be crushed weed—all the herbs looked like weed to her—and pried open the lid.

And immediately wished she hadn't. The bandaged thing—and yes, it *was* bandaged; one point to the British lady—seemed to have been waiting for some unsuspecting idiot to let it loose. She barely had a

chance to frown at it before it leaped from the box and wound its fingers around her throat in a surprisingly strong grip for something attached to nothing at all. The box went tumbling to the floor as Buffy backed up into a rolling cart of things she really didn't want to break, prying at the hand intent on crushing her windpipe. It took a few tugs, but she managed to loosen its hold on her long enough to toss it back onto the pallet. A quick look around and a dagger-grab later, and she had the murderous thing run through with the blade. A blade garnished with a fancy an inlay mother of pearl handle. Giles never let her have things that nice.

Buffy frowned and raised the kebobbed hand to eye-level, surveying the damage. Something told her that the prosperity spell was a moot point, but she supposed she owed it to Anya to try. She had just damaged Magic Box property, after all.

With a sigh, she headed upstairs.

THIS WAS one of those "if you don't laugh, you'll cry" scenarios, but Buffy wasn't laughing. Someone had put the whammy on her. Not a good whammy, either—a Bill Murray whammy. There was a reason *Groundhog Day* had never been one of her favorite movies, much to Xander's horror and continued admonitions. Something about watching a guy live through each day over and over again had only increased her anxiety, to the point that it had almost more of a relief for Buffy than for Bill's character when "I've Got You Babe" was interrupted by Andie McDowell on the day that today became tomorrow.

But at least Bill had had an entire day to loop and an entire town to explore. He'd been able to fill the hours with different things—even if those things had been finite, there had been options. Buffy's loop was much less generous. A stretch of ten to twenty minutes, give or take, entirely dependent upon whether or not she could sedate the damn mummy hand without killing it. Or bring it up to the customer in the box, as she'd tried several times. No dice. The second she opened the lid—because she *had* to open the lid so the customer could see the goods—the mummy hand would lunge for her

throat and she'd be forced to kill it, which landed her back at square one.

Also, Giles and Anya seemed equally apathetic about it. Or perhaps they both thought she was nuts. After attempting to explain what was going on for the seventeenth time, Buffy gave up. The limited time window tied her to a fixed set of circumstances. The customer was hers to deal with—she'd trying pawning her off on Anya to no success. By the time she managed to communicate what was happening to Giles—and the few times she'd gotten him to believe it was real—the loop closed again. She'd tried stalling. She'd tried bolting. She'd tried throwing a temper tantrum that would embarrass a toddler. Nothing had worked. This was her life now, apparently.

Buffy had lost count of the hours. At this point, entire weeks might have flown by. She wasn't hungry—whoever had caught her in this loop had been considerate enough to make sure her body reset to the place it had been before the loop started, so things like food and bathroom breaks weren't a concern. Although that also might mean she'd literally be stuck here forever without the prospect of starving to death to look forward to.

And those were thoughts no one needed, least of all her. The dark turns her mind had taken after the resurrection had been mostly navigable, even in the bleaker moments when she'd thought she might actually follow them to see where they led. But she couldn't, *wouldn't* let her mind stay there for long. Death might not scare her but the thought of killing herself did. She wasn't sure what the difference was, but there *was* a difference—a line in her head dividing the two concepts.

Now, though, in hour whatever of this infernal torment, the prospect no longer felt off-limits. There *was* a way out of this, she knew, but how long before she found it? How much could she withstand before she lost whatever was left of her mind?

There was an alternative, though. One she kept coming back to—almost literally—every time she plodded down the stairs to take another swing at mummy-hand wrangling. An alternative situated on a shelf between a creepy doll and a Gene Simmons statuette.

How bad would it be, really, to wish the loop would end? And even if it was bad, could it be worse than this?

Yes, the logical side of her head had proclaimed for a few hours. *If Giles wants it out of circulation, it's definitely a bad.*

But as her patience thinned and the loop grew no closer to closing itself, she began to doubt just how rational her rational side actually was. The thing she was trapped inside was something she couldn't fight—at least, not in a way that was obvious—and whatever happened as a result of her monkey's paw wish could be handled. Really, after facing down a hellgod and being yanked out of Heaven, there really wasn't much Buffy feared in terms of repercussions.

Though once she opened that mental door, there was no stopping her. If one wish was easy to rationalize, why not two? Why not all three?

So for the next two hours or so, in between running interference with mummy hand lady and being ignored by her watcher and Anya, Buffy let her mind go in a different direction entirely. What, exactly, would she wish for, if she were to wish at all?

First of all, she would wish her way to financial stability. No more of this retail business. No more getting flak because she happened to be stronger than every guy on Xander's construction team and a few of them were too testosterony to admit their butts had been saved by a girl. If she didn't have to work, she would be in a position where she could apply her focus elsewhere. Say on whoever the hell was screwing with her at the present, as they had an ass-kicking appointment she was determined to meet. Money didn't solve all her problems but it would solve the ones that kept her up at night, worrying about paying the electric bill or field trip expenses or, well, anything else. It was simple and not very imaginative—she figured most people would wish for money—but there was a reason the classics never went out of style.

The second wish was an offshoot of the first and came to her almost as quickly. She needed money because she was the sole provider for the family and had to prove herself responsible and capable of taking care of her sister. Not having to worry about losing Dawn would be a massive check in the Win column.

The third wish took longer to dream up. Perhaps that could be the

throwaway wish—what got her out of this loop. But now that she'd ruminated on the fact for a while, that seemed a waste of a perfectly good wish, and she just knew something brilliant would occur to her afterward that would leave her kicking herself. She made all the mental stops—her friends were all about as happy as clams, whatever that meant, her family was her sister and her sister was the subject of Hypothetical Wish Number Two, and then...Giles. Giles had already done what she'd needed him to do in coming back. The only other person in her life wasn't a person at all, though he was the only non-person person she could stand to be around these days.

And it was just him. Spike. Buffy had thought it might be the fact that he was the closest thing to hanging out with death that she had these days, being that he was a vampire. That bothered her—more because she knew it *should* bother her. Pre-mortem Buffy would have been appalled at the thought of spending so much time with Spike. Or, maybe not mortified—there at the end, after he'd sacrificed himself to protect Dawn and her feelings had taken a sharp left turn that she'd never been given the chance to explore—but it would have wigged her out a little. Bothered her probably a lot. Spike being anything other than an evil fiend had twisted her up and good, though she'd been too focused on keeping her sister safe to really allow herself to think it through, much less talk it out with the people she typically relied on.

But since she'd been back, those thoughts had existed more as memories than actual beliefs. A reminder of how Buffy Summers viewed the world and those around her, which did more to make her feel like a shadow of herself than perhaps anything else. Buffy Summers didn't fraternize with the undead, and when she did, it was out of need, not want. Unless the undead in question was Angel, and then it became all about the want.

Except that wasn't what had happened. She'd gone to him—ready to offload all of her mixed-up feelings and experience that blessed relief with the right person. The person who made sense, whose silences wouldn't be awkward and attention would be absolute and without judgment. The ball of dread that had taken up camp in her belly whenever she found herself alone with her friends was supposed to stay away—far away. After all, no one knew her better than Angel.

But Angel didn't know her, either. And she didn't know him. Not like she had. Seeing him had left her feeling more hollowed out than she'd been since the first night. All that expectation, all the assurance, all the certainty that simply being in the same space with Angel would bring her that Spike-brand of comfort had evaporated so fast she'd crashed hard. It was natural, she told herself, that two people separated by so much time would have nothing to say to each other. That catching up would amount to little more than small talk, even with something as large and ungainly as a resurrection to keep the conversation going. She'd coughed out how hard it was to live, and Angel had given her a hug and patted her back and told her that it would get better, she could overcome anything, and it had felt like he was talking to a Buffy who didn't exist anymore.

If he hadn't moved away, or if things had managed to work out, life would be very different. No awkward silences. No forced small talk. No empty platitudes in place of anything meaningful. He would know how to talk to her, and she would know how to talk to him, and maybe being alive again wouldn't be so damned suffocating.

That line of thinking solidified into her third wish. That things had worked out with Angel, so at least he could remain the sole freaky thing in her freaky world that made sense, as he had so long ago.

Once the wishes were there, all in a line—*money, Dawn, Angel*—the resolve to keep from migrating toward the case containing the monkey's paw went from solid steel to wisps of straw. Particularly when she considered that a world where Angel was still with her would be a different world, one without a mummy hand loop. Probably. And even if the loop continued, he could help break her out. That world was alight with all sorts of possibilities.

Still, Buffy didn't rush over to the shelf the second the plan locked into place. She still had her misgivings, having seen more than one wish go badly. It took perhaps another hour, maybe two, of repeated attempts to offload the mummy hand before something inside of her snapped and she found herself, instead of striding toward the box Anya had shown her approximately seven lifetimes ago, closing the distance between herself and that creepy doll. Like the paw was calling to her or something—or maybe that was just the call of sweet relief. The knowl-

edge that not only would the loop likely end, but the world she'd find out there would be a better one.

And if it wasn't, Giles would help her switch it back. He'd know what to do. Given enough time to explain a predicament to him, he never failed to come up with a solution. Or, at the very least, lay the groundwork for Buffy to get there herself.

The monkey's paw seemed strangely warm to the touch when she collected it out of its casing. She released a shaky breath, shoved aside the last niggle of doubt, and said, "I wish I didn't have to worry about money."

Nothing happened—at least, not at first. Then, slowly, one hairy finger curled in on itself.

Holy moly, does that mean it worked? Invigorated, Buffy plowed on ahead, though her brain started throwing up roadblocks immediately. If this was working, it meant she needed to do it right. No tripping over verbiage—she needed the right combination of words, which seemed suddenly evasive.

Finally, after a few seconds of fumbling—and then worrying she had waited too long—she swallowed and blurted, "I wish for Dawn to stay with her family."

A second monkey finger coiled.

All right. One to go.

"I wish there had been a way for Angel and me to stay together."

She held her breath as the extended thumb folded inward, shivering with a bizarre combination of excitement and dread.

It was done. And if it worked...

God, if it worked?

The thought had barely blipped across her mind before the lights in the basement flickered and died, pitching her into darkness.

2

SWUNG AND MISSED. I PUT MY HEART IN THIS

It had been a damn long time since Buffy had been afraid of the dark.

She didn't know how long she stood there, dragging in deep breaths, waiting for something in the shadows to leap out at her. That was typically what happened when the lights were cut—some creature feature tried to press its luck and gain the advantage. And given that she had just used a dark magical artifact, it didn't seem out of the realm of possibility that a hungry demon would be the price of doing business. Though if that were the case, she was going to give Anya some serious grief about not reading the fine print.

As seconds lapsed into minutes, though, Buffy's nerves began to calm. She didn't sense anything in the surrounding dark—at least nothing that set off her Slayer tinglies. After waiting another beat to give anything that might be lurking nearby one last opportunity to strike, she took a step forward, right into what felt like a rolling shelf—one that had definitely not been there before. She struck her shin on something hard and metal, then went stumbling back and into another shelf that had also materialized from nowhere. It jostled and rolled with the force of the contact, sliding into something else, which set off

what could have been the chain reaction from hell, but thankfully lost momentum before anything important could break.

Buffy reached out to feel the air around her, cursing whoever out there had decided that slayers didn't need a preternatural sense of sight—or at least one advanced enough to separate shadows from space in windowless, pitch-black rooms. Thankfully, instinct and muscle memory kicked in—the same that came to her rescue in those fights where she couldn't rely on her eyes—and helped her edge between the shelves toward the staircase that would take her to the shop proper. It wasn't until she was at the door that she realized something was missing.

The monkey's paw that had been in her hand had vanished.

Her heart gave a thump, then another. What did that mean? Had she dropped it? She didn't think so—not with the death grip she'd had on the thing. Buffy swore under her breath and whirled back around, feeling with one hand along the wall for the light switch. The resulting brightness damn near blinded her, but she squinted and forced her eyes to adjust, then felt her jaw go slack.

The place was packed to bursting, stuffed with numerous rolling shelf carts, all piled ceiling-high with inventory. It seemed the entirety of the Magic Box's wares had been stuffed down here. Everything from the fake crystal balls and sage to the collection of ancient books that lined the shop's upper level had been crammed haphazardly anywhere they could be forced to fit. While she'd known just from trying to get to the door that the basement was fuller than it had been, the sight of just how much fuller had her mind blanking so thoroughly that she forgot about the monkey's paw until she turned to help herself back out of the door.

For a moment, she didn't move, considering the sea of inventory below and wondering if she could even find her way back to the place she'd been standing when the lights had gone out. What had felt a little cluttered but mostly organized just a few minutes ago had become utter chaos. No visual landmarks, no natural partitions sectioning off various areas—it was just a hodgepodge of, well, the Magic Box.

"If I need it, I know where to look," Buffy muttered, whirling back around. Careless, yes, but she was too eager to get home.

It shouldn't have been a surprise, considering the state of disarray that was the downstairs, to find the Magic Box empty, but Buffy was surprised anyway. She hadn't known what she expected—hadn't really prepared herself for anything, come to think of it, but the scene that greeted her had her heart somersaulting all over again. All that was left were a few display tables, scattered haphazardly and at angles that suggested they had been shoved into their current positions rather than deliberately situated. Like people had blown through in a hurry. Hell, even the cash register was gone.

How in the world had any of her wishes shut down the Magic Box?

What did I do?

No. *No*. She'd taken too large a chance to give up on it just yet. And it was too soon to start worrying. She just needed more information, that was all, and she would learn nothing just standing around. There could be a very reasonable explanation as to why the Magic Box was shuttered. She needed to get out of here—get home, figure out exactly what the hell had happened, and go from there.

Buffy wet her lips, looked around again to see if she had missed anything—even if there didn't seem to be anything to miss—and jolted when her gaze landed on a set of keys on the table closest to the entrance. It was a familiar keyring—hers—and complete with the novelty keychain Dawn had given her for her birthday. That was right, normal. Meant this was where she was supposed to be. Except the keyring looked off, like the shape it had landed in wasn't one that fit. It wasn't until she picked the thing up and handled it that she saw why. There was the house-key, as well as the key to her mom's gallery—defunct as it was, she had never had the heart to remove it—as well as a new key. One she didn't recognize.

To the shop, maybe?

One way to find out. She opened the door and stuck the key in the lock. It turned, and she released a long sigh.

Well, there was one question answered, at least. But if her first ten minutes in this brave new world were anything to go off, she was in for a long night.

❧

So far so good.

Over the last year and a half, Buffy had been bombarded with first-hand accounts of how, exactly, a simple wish could go wrong. She'd focused specifically on those stories as her desperation to break the time loop had strengthened and her concern about the consequences had whittled away to nothing. Given that she had rattled off three wishes from a supposedly super dark object, she wasn't sure exactly what to expect when she stepped outside the Magic Box. Things *inside* the Magic Box had wigged her out enough.

But the world wasn't burning. Demons weren't running rampant down the streets. Everything seemed more or less normal. The walk home took the appropriate amount of time, and she passed any number of people who seemed perfectly ordinary, if not happy. Parents getting home from work, kids playing in the front lawn, dogs barking, birds squawking—all in all, another day in Sunnydale. Humans going about their human lives, either not aware or not caring that the Hellmouth festered beneath their feet, calling out to all manner of creatures to wreak havoc when the sun went down.

It wasn't until she turned onto Revello Drive that the reality of her wishes caught up with her, though, and it occurred to her just who might be swinging by for her nightly patrol. What would a world in which things had worked out with Angel even look like? Did they have a routine she should know about? A schedule they followed? They hadn't been in a relationship since she was in high school—which felt now a thousand years in the past—and everything about her had been different then. Everything about *them* had been different, very much the product of her mother not being Angel's number one fan and the clear boundaries they had been forced to adhere to in order to keep Angel from unleashing his inner beast.

Buffy would just have to hope she could fake it convincingly until she had all the missing pieces. Would have been nice if the wishes had included a new set of memories—or at least a cheat-sheet—to help clue her into whatever she was about to discover, but she supposed

that had been asking too much. Right now, she was just fortunate the world hadn't imploded.

She sucked in a breath and walked up the steps to her porch, wondering if she had time to change before Angel dropped by. And Dawn—she'd need to establish what the routine was there as well. Her sister should have been home for a while, hopefully catching up on homework and doing other sorts of things normal in a stable, secure household—the sort that would never be under the scrutiny of social services.

Those were things she would have to bluff her way through until the norms of this world became obvious. She could do this—she'd been pretending around her friends for a couple of weeks now, and no one had so far doubted her "I was in a hell dimension" story.

Buffy pushed the front door open, then stepped inside. At first look, everything seemed to be normal, if perhaps in a different state of disarray from what she'd left that morning. There was the dining room to her right, table and everything, and the living room to her left. The air smelled vaguely off—not bad, just not the *home* she was accustomed to, but that could be anything. The tension that had coiled in her stomach began to unwind, and she let herself relax.

That was until she walked far enough inside for the sound of gunshots and squealing tires to reach her ears. Television sounds—nothing abnormal there—but Buffy had *just* had a conversation with Dawn about doing her homework before turning anything on. And though her brain had been on the sluggish side ever since she'd crawled her way out of her grave, she was reasonably certain she remembered her sister complaining about an English essay she had to turn in by Friday. Wishing herself into a new life likely hadn't done anything to change a class syllabus, which meant it was time to pretend like everything was normal and act the part of the parent.

"Hey," Buffy said in her gearing-up-for-a-lecture voice as she rounded the corner to the living room, "I really hope you have that—"

She stopped short in the doorway, her heart seizing.

The person on her couch wasn't Dawn. It was Angel.

Angel.

It was a moment before she could do anything more than blink. Of all the possibilities that had crowded her brain between the Magic Box and home, that she would find Angel already here—waiting for her, dressed like he'd stayed the night—hadn't made the roster. In truth, she wasn't sure she'd really believed any of what she'd told herself on that walk home until right now. That the wishes had been anything more than something whispered in a fit of desperation hadn't solidified in her head as a true possibility, even after finding the shop all closed up. That any magical artifact had the ability to fix her life, and to do so without fanfare, had been too bright a thing to hope for, especially since she hadn't felt anything like hope in longer than she could remember.

But he was here. Angel. And judging by his wardrobe—a wife-beater and a pair of pajama bottoms—he'd been here for some time. In her home, on her couch, watching her television. He hadn't even looked up.

Astonishment began to wane, edged out by that sense of wrongness that had enveloped her at the Magic Box. "Angel?"

A beat, then he grunted. A small grunt, more a huff, but nothing further. Not so much as a glance in her direction. Buffy pressed her lips together, worry rushing back in at full speed as she took in the rest of the scene. The potato chip bag sitting on the coffee table next to a collection of beer bottles, the dried stain that stretched across his wife-beater, like he had spilled something and just decided to let it set. He was unshaven and his hair was in a mess that suggested he hadn't done anything to clean himself up today, and his gaze, though unfocused, was fixed on the screen. He had one hand loosely tucked into the waistline of his pants and the other curled around the remote, and unless her eyes were playing tricks with her, his belly looked a bit... round. Not a ton—it could have easily been a trick of the light—but enough to have her inner alarm bells sounding at full blast.

"Angel?" Buffy repeated, stronger this time.

This time she got more than a grunt. He pulled his attention off the television long enough to nod at her in greeting. "Hey. Did you find it?"

"Find it?"

He rolled his eyes and lowered his feet from the coffee table in a

move that was so completely un-Angel-like it was hard to reconcile. "I'll take that as a no," he said and sighed. "Maybe next time you can trust me to help."

All right, so Angel was here and apparently they were in the middle of a fight. Insofar as wishes granted by dark objects went, that was a little on the tame side. Buffy released a breath. "I'd love it if you helped," she said, taking a tentative step toward him. The scenery didn't change—it was really him. "Maybe we can try again tomorrow?"

Angel stared at her, long enough that the warmth that had bubbled up inside began to fizzle.

"So now you want my help." His tone was flat, almost accusatory. "It's hard to keep up with you, you know?"

"I'm...sorry?"

"You're sorry." Another long beat, then he huffed and shook his head. "I think I prefer it when you're screaming. At least that's honest."

Okay, the dark wish granter had apparently done more than stick them in a fight. The last of the warmth faded entirely, replaced by a more familiar rising sense of panic. Buffy stepped forward, raising a hand. "Angel, I don't know what I said, but—"

He shot to his feet with such speed it sent a flurry of crumbs that had apparently collected on his belly to the floor, and a siren started going off in Buffy's head. While Spike was an abnormal sort of vampire who enjoyed munching on solid foods—onion blossom, buffalo wings, whatever she had around the house—Angel had maintained the party line that vampires didn't eat anything aside from blood. They certainly didn't lounge around their girlfriend's house, munching on chips and bingeing crappy television, either. Or maybe they did—she hadn't ever actually asked Angel how he kept himself occupied when on his own. In her head, he'd devoted himself to tai chi or reading or...something. Hell, he hadn't even owned a television when she'd known him before—not at the apartment and certainly not at the mansion. Part of her had assumed he was so old fashioned that he found bits of modernity like that abrasive or otherwise beneath him.

"I don't have time for this," Angel muttered as he stalked toward her—she thought, for a wild moment, to greet her with a kiss, but he

veered to the left and sidestepped her for the staircase. "Poker night with the boys. I need to get ready."

Buffy stared at the scattering of crumbs on the floor, dazed, then turned around. "Ah, okay," she said, though it was certainly *not* okay, but she couldn't get into that right now. Not until she understood what it was exactly she'd walked into. "And Dawn?"

Angel paused halfway up the stairs, his back ramrod straight.

"I can only say I'm sorry so many times," he muttered. "But you're the one who said you didn't need help."

The sirens in her head hit a new decibel. "Angel, what—"

"I'm not having this fight now. You know I hate to be late."

He was moving again before Buffy could find her voice. Instead, she stood there like an idiot, watching as he took the turn that would lead to her mother's room—Willow and Tara's room—with a sort of familiarity and inattention he'd never once displayed when in her home before.

She looked back to the living room and its mess—the crumbs, the bag of chips, the bottles on the coffee table. And what should have clicked right away finally did.

Angel lived here. They weren't just together, they were cohabitating.

And Dawn. Something had happened to Dawn. Something this world's Buffy had blamed on Angel.

Buffy didn't realize she had torn up the stairs until she was on the landing, scrambling for her sister's bedroom. She knew what she would find—or wouldn't find—but needed to see it anyway because this was *not* the way things were supposed to be. The paw had granted the Angel wish and while she couldn't remember exactly the wording she'd used, one of her other wishes had been for Dawn—not worrying anymore about social services, not worrying because Dawn was home, surrounded by the people who loved her, the people she belonged with.

She couldn't be dead.

But she found Dawn's room empty. Or not *empty* empty, but close enough to matter. The bed was there, stripped of its linens, and other assorted pieces of furniture, including a dresser with one drawer

hanging loose. The posters, though, and the lamps, and the collection of clothes and stuffed animals and books—none of it was here. This room was not lived in.

The panic from earlier hit a fever pitch. Buffy's legs wobbled and her vision blurred, her skin flushing hot and cold at the same time, and everything inside her threatening to shatter. A sob wrangled itself free of her throat before she could stop it, and she stumbled back from the room and its offensive emptiness, slapping a hand over her mouth as hot tears began scaling down her cheeks.

There was a sigh from the direction of her mother's room, and Angel was there, crowding the hall, crowding *her*, and looking something more than annoyed.

"I'm not apologizing again," he informed her in a cold, detached tone that made her hate him. Because this was not Angel. This was someone else—a stranger living in her home, wearing her old boyfriend's face and regarding her with lazy contempt. Not caring that her sister was gone, not caring what that meant or how it hurt. Apparently, in order to make things work with Angel, Angel had to be a completely different person.

"What did you do to her?" Buffy demanded in a low voice she barely recognized as her own.

Angel sighed and rolled his eyes *again*, tearing a hand through his hair. He'd dressed in a pair of sweats and a pullover, looking less like himself by the minute.

"For the last time," he said, "I did what was best. What did you expect, Buffy? You were gone. I had no reason to think that it wouldn't be forever, and Dawn needed more than an ex-vampire and a couple of witches to give her the life she deserves. What the hell do I know about raising a kid?"

Buffy wiped at her cheeks, confusion shoving aside the anger.

Wait, what?

"And it's not like Dawn ever liked me to begin with," Angel continued, and there was no mistaking the bitterness in his voice. "All this house had was bad memories and a guy she couldn't stand. Was it the best move? I don't know—obviously I wouldn't have even considered it if Willow and the others had clued me in to what they were planning

to do. All I could do was what seemed right at the time, and that seemed right. Now, if you'll excuse me..." He heaved a sigh—a sort of *lost cause* sigh—and plonked his way down the stairs. A second later, the front door slammed closed, blanketing Buffy in an uneasy quiet.

What the hell had happened here?

Okay. Okay, think.

Angel lived here. *Really* lived here. And apparently, they had moved into her mother's room? Did that mean Willow and Tara didn't live here?

Buffy forced her feet to move, though she wasn't sure her brain was prepared for another shock. Except she didn't have time to worry about that—she needed as much information as she could get about the world she'd landed in. So when she barreled over the threshold and into a room that she didn't recognize, she didn't allow herself more than a few seconds to take in the scenery. There was a messy, unmade bed and piles of clothes scattered across the floor. A dresser—her dresser? It looked strange in here—was pressed against the wall, dusty and cluttered with random receipts, change, and what looked to be a collection of jewelry. The nightstands on either side of the bed were both equipped with lamps and, unlike the dresser, relatively clear of debris, save the odd magazine or worn paperback. All in all, and unlike the scene down the hall, the room looked lived-in. Foreign, but lived-in. She saw enough of herself in the clothes spilling out of the dresser and the addition of Mr. Gordo on the right side of the bed to tell her this was where she slept. Apparently with Angel.

Buffy decided to rifle through Angel's nightstand first. See if he had anything in there that might indicate what it was he'd done with Dawn. His little speech had given her some information, enough for Buffy to gather she had taken the swan dive in this world as well, and whatever had happened to Dawn had been a result of her hundred-and-forty-seven day absence. Angel feeling...what, overwhelmed with the responsibility of handling a teenager? That didn't sound like the Angel she knew—but then this Angel was hardly the Angel she knew. And what had happened that her friends had just let Angel make that sort of decision—that *Giles* would stand for it, when Giles knew that Dawn was Buffy's line in the sand?

The first drawer of Angel's nightstand yielded nothing useful—just more magazines that had ended up shoved inside rather than taken out with the rest of the trash. Buffy sighed and pushed the drawer back in, then moved to the bottom one.

And almost screamed at what she saw inside.

What in the world would Angel need a gun for? Had she known about this—this world's Buffy? She was pretty sure her answer would have been a firm no, had he asked her about it. Dawn was clumsy enough without the added help of firearms in the house. Or maybe Angel had bought the gun after making whatever decision he'd made regarding Dawn. But again, why? What possible use could he have for it?

Who is he?

Buffy swallowed, pushed the drawer back, and rose slowly to her feet. That sense of imbalance, of *wrongness* that had hit her at the Magic Box had been a steady companion ever since she'd noted the crumbs on the floor downstairs. The distant, disaffected way Angel talked to her, and how he'd all but bolted the second she'd come home.

Something was seriously wrong.

Don't stop. Keep looking.

She rounded the bed on legs that wouldn't stop trembling, lowered herself to the floor and started rifling through the assorted junk that had accumulated on the top of her nightstand. There were a few more magazines, even a few issues she recognized. This Buffy's subscription habits and hers weren't totally at odds, which was both comforting and not. Evidence of how they were dissimilar could perhaps help her account for Angel being a totally different person, but there was nothing here that Buffy couldn't see herself owning.

With a sigh, she opened the first drawer, and her heart leaped.

It was stuffed with paperwork—what looked to be a collection of report cards and letters from Dawn's school. She fumbled over the first few pages, scanning the words faster than her brain could make sense of them, willing something profound to leap out at her. But the longer she looked, the more that initial rush of discovery began to wane, and she realized these were things she'd had from before. Nothing from the current semester, more a collection of literature the school had

given her when they'd had their first serious heart-to-heart about Dawn's wellbeing, and if she, Buffy, could really act as a caregiver when she was so young, herself.

Buffy sat back on her legs, her eyes stinging. It was almost worse than having found nothing at all. Her stomach twisted and her throat burned.

What the hell had she done?

No. Keep looking. There has to be something.

She shoved in the topmost drawer and pulled the lower one out, half-fearing that she would discover another firearm. She didn't. The lower drawer only had two things in it—a small, wooden keepsake box that she didn't recognize, and underneath that, a framed photo. One of her and Angel, the captured image of a scene Buffy didn't remember.

One Buffy didn't understand.

She was in a white dress, veil and everything, and Angel was beside her—the Angel she remembered, not the caricature she'd met downstairs. Looking down at her with a beaming smile and warm, sparkling eyes, carefree and brimming with love.

And they were both standing under a bright, radiant sun.

3

I JUGGLE ONE-HANDED, DO SOME MAGIC TRICKS AND THE BEST IMITATION OF MYSELF

She hadn't noticed the ring. How had she not noticed the ring?

Buffy sat on the floor in her mom's—*hers and Angel's*—bedroom, gaze fixed on the glittering diamond winking up at her from her ring finger. It was pretty. Modest in size, but modesty was fine with her, especially given the amount of stress she must put it under on a nightly basis. The edges were sharp enough to certify the thing as a weapon in its own right. There would be no taking that puppy off before patrol. A good slayer seized every advantage.

The ring had been on her finger long enough to embed its impression in her skin, to feel so much like a part of her that she noticed its absence more than its presence when she removed it.

Married. The word sounded strange in her head. *Married* was something other people were, something other people got to do. *Married* was an adult concept. *Married* wasn't Buffy.

But she was. There was no doubt. If the ring wasn't enough, there was the picture.

Buffy shifted her gaze from the ring to the framed photo of a wedding she didn't remember. A wedding that had taken place on a day

bursting with sunshine and featuring an Angel who could stand under its rays without fear. An Angel who was human.

He'd said something about that, she remembered. A throwaway line she'd been too preoccupied to focus on, overwhelmed as she had been with Dawn's absence. But it came to her now as it should have then, so loud and abrasive her temples pounded. It was too much for her—all of it was too much. The deadened sensation she'd been determined to chase away, the physical ache that was her longing for Heaven, compounded now in a bombardment of information too tangled to begin to unravel. But it was still there, and being that this was her mess, she didn't have the luxury of ignoring it.

"Dawn needed more than an ex-vampire and a couple of witches to give her the life she deserves."

An ex-vampire. Angel was an ex-vampire. An ex-vampire she'd married, one who ate people food and left messes in the living room and had a freaking gun in his nightstand. An ex-vampire who had apparently done something so her sister wasn't here anymore and they were fighting now, or had been, and Angel wasn't sorry. He was off with others—poker night, he'd said—because that was a thing he did. Human, husband Angel had a poker night.

In the many, many times a younger Buffy had fantasized about Angel turning human, the future hadn't looked even remotely like this. Granted, that Buffy hadn't had a sister to worry about—even if she didn't remember it that way—and couldn't have conceived of a time when her mother wouldn't be here to help her navigate life's tougher choices, or that her friends would have viewed her death as a surmountable obstacle. No, in the head of teenage Buffy, Angel becoming human would solve all of her problems, because all of her problems had, at the time, revolved around the fact that he wasn't human. The second she'd accepted her fate, embraced that being with Angel meant certain sacrifices, he'd left her to shatter, and that had also been because he was a vampire. A human Angel wouldn't have a curse, wouldn't be immortal, wouldn't have anything standing in the way of being with Buffy the way she'd always dreamed.

Had all of that happened in this world?

Buffy released a shaky breath, forcing her gaze to the keepsake box

—the other thing that she'd had squirreled away in the nightstand. She hadn't opened it yet, knew she should—that she had to—but was afraid of what she might find inside.

Afraid of what else she might have done.

How had she worded her wishes? The wording was what mattered, wasn't it? The wish involving Dawn had been centered on Buffy's growing anxiety regarding social services. Whatever Angel had done had clearly removed social services from the picture. Or perhaps he'd handed her over, and Buffy didn't need to worry about social services anymore because the fight was over and she'd lost. Only why in the world would Angel think Dawn was better off thrown into the foster system than with the people who loved her?

Do they love her, though? None of her friends had been biologically altered to love her sister. All they had were years' worth of false memories and perhaps some loyalty to Buffy herself to keep Dawn happy and healthy. Had it just been Giles who had suggested sacrificing Dawn was the only way to beat Glory? Had anyone else insisted that she wasn't really Buffy's sister?

She'd told Spike that she was counting on him to protect Dawn, knowing he would, above everyone else. Willow had been too focused on Tara and the larger role she had to play. Xander and Anya had been question marks, and even if they hadn't they weren't strong enough to stand between Dawn and a pissed-off hellgod. And Giles had made his feelings perfectly clear.

Spike wouldn't have let anything happen to Dawn if he were here. If he loved her. Did that mean he wasn't? That he didn't?

Nothing in this world could be assumed. She needed more information, which meant looking in the damn box.

With shaking hands, Buffy lifted the keepsake box to eye-level. It was sturdier than the sort she'd had as a child, the wood smooth and cherry-red, curved where it needed to be curved and reinforced with brass hinges along the seams and lid. There was a brass lock as well—one she could easily break if she had a mind to, but something kept her from doing it. Buffy knew herself well enough to understand that she hadn't placed the box and the framed photo in the bottom drawer just to get them out of the way. One was tied to the other, and if she felt

the need to keep the box's contents protected by lock and key, then busting it open was a very bad idea.

Probably.

Unless, of course, what was inside was tied to Dawn's whereabouts, though somehow Buffy didn't think so. But nothing was certain.

Giles. I need Giles.

Yes, whatever was going on, Giles would be able to help. He had to.

Buffy swallowed and forced herself to move. Wedding day photo and keepsake box back in the nightstand—which, yes, she once again searched for sign of a key, but no dice. Not that this was all that surprising. If whatever this world's Buffy had to hide was worth locking up, she wouldn't be so dense as to keep the key within reach.

But that was something to worry about later. Right now, she had a watcher to find.

Hopefully, he would only yell a little.

SHE'D CALL it a side-effect of the hangover from Heaven, not knowing exactly where Giles was staying. The first place she checked was his old apartment on the off-chance that this world's Giles hadn't taken off after her death—which Buffy was still reasonably certain had happened, given Dawn's not being there. However, she'd known before she'd set foot in the courtyard that it was no good. The windows were dark and the whole area had this vague, unlived-in feeling that gave her the wiggins.

In her world, Giles had spent the first couple nights he'd been back in town on her couch. Where he'd gone after that was anyone's guess. He'd just said something about having made arrangements elsewhere. She'd never asked where the *else* was.

Or had he told her? That seemed possible too. As much time as she spent inside her head these days, sometimes she missed whatever was happening outside of it.

Buffy thought about hitting Xander's place, then wondered if it was still Xander's. Or Willow and Tara, who were probably on campus if they weren't staying at Revello Drive any longer, though tracking down

their dorm would be something of a challenge. And there was Spike—maybe. She wasn't sure she was brave enough to take a trek through Restfield only to find his crypt was empty. That might be the blow that broke the Buffy's back, considering he'd been the only person who had helped her feel anywhere close to normal in her own damn world.

The Bronze seemed the safest option. And if the gang wasn't there, well, she'd just have to suck it up and go on patrol. Do her best to pretend any of this was normal.

It wasn't until she turned the corner to the Bronze and saw the familiar gathering of locals outside the front door that she realized that part of her had doubted it would still be here. The rest of the world was screwy, after all, but here stood the Bronze, unchanging as ever. The sign looked right, as did everything around it, including the dumpsters toward the end of the alley. Buffy released a long breath and forced herself to relax.

Things would make sense. She'd make them make sense.

The atmosphere inside was just as encouraging. Loud, abrasive music coming from the stage—check. Sea of writhing coeds simulating sex on the dance floor—check. Crack of balls at the pool table—check. Inability to hear one's own thoughts above the bajillion conversations happening at once—check. Finally, a corner of Sunnydale that hadn't changed at all. Whatever remaining tension Buffy had been carrying began to ease.

This was familiar. She could handle this.

"Buffy! Hey, Buffy!"

Buffy about melted with relief when the voice reached her ears. Hell, she thought she might cry. Sagging somewhat, she turned and plastered on an everything's-okay smile just as Willow pushed her way through the sea of patrons and came up beside her.

"Will! God, I am so glad to see you, you have no idea."

Willow blinked, her lips tugging into a confused but pleased grin. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Was that weird? She guessed it would be if she'd said it in her world, egg-shell walking as she had been ever since clawing her way to freedom. Buffy furrowed her brow and shook her head. "Sorry. It's been a strange day all around. I'm a little loopy up top."

"I'm guessing you had no luck at the Magic Box."

"Luck?"

"You know, finding it?" Willow's smile melted and she tossed a glance over her shoulder before leaning in, almost conspiratorially. "If you didn't, I wouldn't mention anything about the shop if I were you. She's...well, she's being Anya. Which, take that as you will."

Buffy nodded as though she understood, though already her brain was beginning to spin again. Of course, her first instinct was to ask Willow to identify the *it*, but as off-balance as she was, she knew that would sound weird and she wasn't quite ready to let everyone know she wasn't their Buffy. Not without talking to Giles first, at least.

"Come on," Willow said, tugging on Buffy's wrist and pulling her back toward the high-top tables. "It won't be that bad. If she starts being Mega Anya, just give me or Tara the signal and we'll rescue you."

Again, Buffy nodded as though any of that made sense, willing the new barrage of questions shooting through her head to slow the hell down so she could gather her bearings. Anya wasn't someone Buffy worried about on most days, so the thought that she might need rescuing was a bit extreme. Unless Willow was talking in code, like they had when Xander had first started bringing Anya to everything. Willow's patience for the former-demon had been on the non-existent side, so anytime she'd needed a break, she'd ask Buffy if she had any aspirin. Not very subtle, but neither Xander nor Anya had ever caught on.

No telling if that tactic would work now, but if she needed an escape, Buffy would roll it out.

"She's still mad, huh?" Buffy asked on the off-chance her friend would drop a hint she could work with.

Willow threw her a look. "Uhh, yeah. Yeah, I think it's gonna take a while for her to put this behind her. And I know it's not your fault, but I get it. Even if it is totally unfair to take it out on you, with Giles being..." She let out a shaky breath. "Anyway, just...give her time and try to avoid punching her face off."

Buffy's heart performed a jumping jack. "Giles being—"

"Not now."

Not now what? What the hell did that mean?

But she didn't have time to ask, because they were approaching the table and she had to be this world's Buffy. This world's Buffy, who already knew what they weren't going to talk about now and didn't need any reminders.

God, the sooner she found Giles, the better.

Given how everything else had gone since she'd opened her eyes in this world, Buffy had no idea what to expect when they reached the table. Anya's temper tantrums, in her experience, tended to be somewhat superficial, though she was loyal to the store. A store that was incredibly closed at the moment for reasons no one was considerate enough to just spill. The bits and pieces she'd gathered so far made sense, she could see they belonged to the same picture, but where the connections met was another thing altogether.

The scene that greeted her, though, hit her much like seeing the Bronze had. Xander, Anya, and Tara circled around their table—Tara with her customary friendly smile, Xander's eyes lighting up and Anya... Well, Anya apparently making sport of stabbing the ice in her drink with her straw, and very intent upon it. Becoming more intent, in fact, the second Xander bellowed out his welcome.

"Buffy! You made it!" Xander greeted with an enthusiastic wave. He seemed to be doing that thing where he pretended Anya was invisible in the hope of ignoring away the tension. "I was beginning to think you were a dream we all had."

Buffy arched an eyebrow and tried for a grin.

"You know," he continued a second later after a forced laugh, sliding off his stool as though to run interference. "'Cause it's been so long since we've seen you. I take it Angel had a thing tonight."

She didn't have time to reflect on how weird it was to hear him asking about Angel without scowling or rolling his eyes. Asking about him *at all*, in fact. But she didn't have time to dwell on it, for Xander took her in an awkward one-armed hug and angled his mouth close to her ear to murmur, "Just remember that I have to live with her, so please don't bring up the shop, okay?"

Buffy forced herself to nod once more, her skin feeling tighter by the second and the pressure in her temples resuming the harsh cadence that had been there before she'd left the house.

"For the record, though," Xander continued, "I know it's not your fault—we all do—and I am *very* glad to see you." Then, clearing his throat, he practically shouted, "So where is Angel?"

"Umm, poker night," Buffy said.

"Ahh, poker night with the guys." He released a sigh and helped himself back onto his barstool. "Well, good. Sounds like he's getting back into the groove."

She didn't know how to respond to that, but a nod seemed innocuous enough. "Yeah," she agreed, sliding onto a barstool beside Tara. "Grooves are...important."

"Any luck tracking down the Dawnster?"

At the mention of her sister, Buffy gripped the table so hard she felt the metal give. *Tracking down?* So Dawn was somewhere else—somewhere not Sunnydale. While she'd already surmised as much, hearing it confirmed, even somewhat airily, had every bit of her on alert. "What was the last I told you?" she asked. "It's...hard to keep up."

"Uhh, I think the last thing you told us was you were going to murder Angel and make it look like an accident," Willow said, climbing onto the vacant seat on Tara's other side. "Buffy, we haven't seen you since the funeral."

She gripped the table again, this time to hold herself steady as everything else threatened to tip on its side. The question was there, bubbling in her throat—*whose funeral?*—but she managed to swallow it back. This was the only piece of control she had over herself, everything else spiraling madly out of it. At once her skin felt feverish, her heart thudding so hard her ribs might crack, the noise in her head reaching a piercing octave that robbed her of her equilibrium. Her body seemed to be in complete meltdown mode, tears swelling and stomach roiling and lungs seizing all at once, and somehow in competition with each other.

Her body knew even if her mind rejected it. Her body knew whose funeral it had been.

"Right," Buffy managed to wheeze out, blinking eyes that were suddenly overfull. That Willow responded by giving her a watery smile and grabbing her hand only made things worse. Made her understand

that she was right—that thing she didn't want to think, didn't want to know, but did anyway. "I—umm. Well, Angel's still... He said that he thought it was for the best. Dawn. That he wasn't equipped to raise her."

"Yeah, we know that part," Xander said, and now he sounded more like himself. More like the guy who had been hating on Angel since well before Angel had given them all a reason. "Still think it was a load of you-know-what, but hey."

"Xander," Willow snapped as though he had spoken out of turn.

"What? Is it a secret?" he shot back, eyebrows raised. "I know they didn't get along, but come on. He's the one with two centuries of experience. Call me crazy, but I think that made him the grownup of the relationship. And he knew we'd all be against it, otherwise he would've told us about it rather than just ship her off to Daddy Dearest."

Dad? Buffy forced her teeth hard enough into her lower lip that the coppery taste of blood flooded her mouth. Her father. That was where Angel had sent Dawn. To the guy who had fooled around behind their mother's back and hadn't even had the decency to stop by after the funeral to see how his daughters were managing living in a world without her. The guy who had been more or less absent from both of their lives ever since the divorce, save for the random phone call, which was typically a formality to canceling any plans they might have been optimistic enough to make. Aside from the summer between her sophomore and junior years, Buffy hadn't spent more than two hours in her father's company since moving to Sunnydale.

Had her father attended *her* funeral, or had he been too busy that day?

"I mean, not that he hasn't built up a bunch of goodwill over the years," Xander went on. "Except, wait, he hasn't. And anyone who knows and loves Buffy should know that no one is better equipped to handle Dawn than the Scoobies, so no, I still don't get why it's even necessary to have this conversation, as she never should have left home in the first place."

"What do you think should have been done, Xander?" Anya practically exploded, rolling her eyes and throwing her hands in the air. "I, for one, did not want to be a newlywed with a fifteen-year-old. Willow

and Tara are still in school and Giles got on the first plane to England with no intention of coming back. Would you have preferred Angel remain her guardian, with his history of stalking and seducing fifteen-year-olds?"

"Hey!" Buffy said reflexively, though now that the horrible thought had been voiced, she couldn't unhear it. Hell, it had never occurred to her, really, that Dawn was the same age she'd been when Angel had first stepped out of the shadows and into her life. Only then, fifteen had seemed much older than it did now, and for her it had been, given all she'd shouldered. But the thought remained, firm and sticky, and she didn't like it.

Angel had told her once that he'd seen her before she'd been called, that she'd been bright and beautiful and in the sunlight—though he'd never mentioned how he'd managed that part. He'd seen her and known her heart, and he'd loved her for everything she was separated from the Slayer. And at the time, that had been all kinds of swoony and romantic, the idea that her great love had loved her even before he'd known her. But the girl she'd been then wasn't too far removed from the girl Dawn was now, only more naïve and less prepared. A child in every sense of the word.

"Wait," Buffy muttered, something else piercing through the fog. She looked up, meeting Xander's eyes. "Newlywed?"

Anya sniffed. "Figures you wouldn't remember."

"Ahn, please," Xander said, covering his apparent wife's hand with his own and giving it a squeeze. "We made that announcement at Giles's funeral and we've hardly seen Buffy since. So it's not exactly like—"

There it was. The thing her body had known was true, even as the rest of her had refused to believe it. And Buffy disconnected—from herself, the conversation, her mind altogether. There was only so much the brain could take before it cried uncle, and hers was beyond crying.

She'd known better. Goddammit, she'd known better. Any other time, any other place, any other stretch of twenty minutes and she never would have done it. Dark magic had a price and that thing, that paw, had been darker than dark. So dark Giles had sought it out just to destroy it, and somehow she'd managed to talk herself into using it.

The endless loop she'd been trapped inside had been a handy stage, the exact right set of circumstances to wheedle her resolve down to pretty much nothing, dangle the carrot in front of her long enough to make herself believe any out was better than living her life eternally in the walk from the shop proper to the dim, occult paraphernalia-stuffed basement. Somehow in between trips up the stairs to the cash-wrap, Buffy had forgotten a universal truth—that no matter how bad things were, they could always get worse.

Or perhaps she hadn't trusted that *worse* existed in a world where she had been torn from paradise. Where just opening her eyes in the morning took energy she didn't have, where she struggled to feel anything but the vacant numbness that her life had become. Any world, any reality, any version of living had to have been better, because if it wasn't, then why even try?

She'd fooled herself into believing a lie. Worse, she'd known it was a lie from the start. She'd just chosen to ignore it.

The resulting mess was hers, and all its casualties. Dawn was gone. Giles was dead. Angel was some shadow of his former self. All of it was on her.

"I need a minute," Buffy blurted, and slid off the stool without awaiting a response. "I'll... I'll be right back."

She had no idea whether or not she would, in fact, be back. Going back meant hearing more, and hearing meant knowing, and she wasn't sure she could handle that. The sensation of the air against her skin was stifling enough at the moment—thick and heavy with smoke and sweat and voices of people screaming over music, not knowing that this world only existed because she had wished it so.

Buffy stumbled first toward the door, her feet apparently ahead of her brain, then swerved wildly in the direction of the restrooms when it became clear the path to the exit wouldn't be an easy one. The Bronze being the only outlet in town for, well, anyone meant that some nights, it was packed to bursting. This was one of those nights—of course it was. If she was going to have a breakdown, best ensure half of Sunnydale had the privilege of a front-row seat.

She'd go into the girl's room. Splash some water on her face, like they did in movies and see if that helped at all. Seemed unlikely but

she was willing to try anything at this point. All she needed was the fortitude to get through the rest of the evening without arousing Willow or Xander's suspicions because how did one exactly confess something like this?

"*Sorry, the world used to suck only half as much. So, all this? You have me to thank for that.*"

There would be questions and yelling and so much confusion and she would have no answers. None. If asked to reconstruct the line of thinking that had led to the moment where she'd decided to use the monkey's paw, she was almost certain she couldn't. Just that, for a blip of an instant, things had been crystal clear.

Buffy stuttered to a stop halfway down the hall, her heart ratcheting up its hammering as the weight of everything came down on her again. The combination of things in the air making it difficult to convince herself that her lungs were working, and that difficulty lighting the same panic inside her that she'd experienced the night she'd awakened in her coffin. Gasping, cloying, knowing that breathable oxygen was just close enough to taste if she could just get there in time, not wanting it but needing it all the same.

A door opened. A hand wrapped around her wrist, then the floor was moving. Buffy stumbled against something cool and firm, solid when everything else around her was not. Then the door closed, blanketing her in the comforting dark, and she gulped down air so fast her chest whined in protest.

"It's all right, pet," he said, and pressed a cool kiss against her brow. "It's all right now. Spike's here."

And before she could find her footing, he cupped the back of her head and swallowed her mouth with his.

4

OR I COULD JUST KEEP ON MOVING ON, MOVING ON, MOVING ON, MOVING ON AND NOT STOP 'TIL I GET TO NORMAL

IT HAPPENED AGAIN.

It always happened around Spike.

The world tumbling, her life in ruins, the parts of her not in motion grabbing and seizing and hoping to find something sturdy enough to take her at her strongest but supportive enough to hold her at her weakest. Sound and fury and more than that pounding against her temples and beating against her skin until she was a walking bruise, and nothing made it better. Nothing at all, except those moments she stole away with him.

It shouldn't be like this—not in her world or in this one. That Spike was in love with her was one of those things she knew, a thing she accepted, and toward what should have been the end of her life, she had felt...something. She hadn't known what it was, had hardly had any time to analyze it and, if she were being honest with herself, she'd more or less figured that she never would. Death was her art, after all, and they had been racing toward the showing. While she hadn't gone into the final battle consciously knowing it would be her final one, she also *had*. And dead women didn't need to scrutinize the confusing not-hate feelings they had for vampires. Dead women got to rest.

But Buffy wasn't dead anymore. She wasn't quite alive, either. And

those feelings she'd had for Spike before she'd jumped had pulled her to him ever since the night she'd walked down the stairs. Since she'd realized that the pain that came with living wasn't as intense around him as it was around the others, because with him, part of her could remain dead.

The rest of her, he managed to bring to life.

And here he was, doing it again. Only now with deep, nicotine-flavored kisses that somehow ignited her like nothing ever had. The way his lips felt, touched and pulled, how he nipped and sipped and tugged and drank her in as though she were the thing standing between him and dust. This was wrong, she knew, for a myriad of reasons, not the least of which was this world's Buffy was a married woman. Married to *Angel*, the guy who would always be the one. But the thought of pulling back had her head pounding all over again, the panic she'd just barely managed to dodge beginning its ascent, whispering things it would soon scream.

This wasn't her world. This wasn't her reality. This wasn't her life.

So she crumbled, she gave in. Spike pushed his tongue into her mouth and she pushed back, feeding him everything he was giving her and more. Nothing else was right and she was tired of fighting it. She trembled when he moaned into her, when he rolled his hips so that she could feel him, long and hard against her belly, sending anticipatory tingles down her spine and across her skin. Tingles that bloomed into something beyond plain warmth—something that felt so damn good she could freaking cry. Hell, she might, the way this was going.

"Oh, my sweet little Slayer," Spike mumbled against her lips, pulling back so that she could gulp down a breath. Kind of him, since she had forgotten. "Why didn't you come this way sooner? Coulda had you to heaven and back a few times by now. Or as close as we can get you these days."

The words both stung and didn't. She didn't have time to think on that, either, for Spike lowered his mouth to her neck and began to nibble, scaling a hand down her arm until his fingers were dancing along the waistband of her jeans.

"How do you want me tonight?" he murmured against her throbbing pulse. "Want it to hurt a little?"

Why not? Everything else hurt.

"Or do you need remindin'?"

Buffy blinked, dragging in breaths that tasted of him. The cigarettes he'd smoked earlier, a hint of whatever burning alcohol he'd poured down his throat, leather and spice and everything nice. That was one thing she'd noticed plenty since she'd been back from the dead—just how amazing Spike smelled, when he had no right to. How he made death seem like living, or at least the sort of living she could stand.

"Reminding?" she asked when she convinced her voice to work. "Of what?"

He nipped at her pulse point, making her jolt and whimper and press her thighs together all at once, the chorus of *wrong* still ringing in her head, but even fainter than it had been before.

"That you're mine." He unbuttoned her jeans and dragged the zipper down. "Much as I am yours."

She both wanted to ask and she didn't—more that she didn't, because *reminding* was the last thing she thought she could stand at the moment. Whatever else was normal in this world, for this Buffy and this Spike. She wanted to forget, and Spike was good at that—helping her forget. Forget Heaven, forget the pain that came with dragging in breath, forget the worries stacked up at home and the friends she couldn't trust. Forget, forget, forget, and never remember ever, if she could help it.

Spike seemed to take her silence as acquiescence, for he pulled another kiss from her lips—and *god*, the way he kissed was something else—before he flashed her a grin she somehow managed to see in the dark and began a quick descent down her body, touching and stroking and nibbling in ways that let her know, as nothing else had, that he knew all her weak spots. Where, exactly, to apply pressure on her throat, just the right amount of attention to pay her breasts, that her nipples were often too sensitive but sometimes that was part of the fun. And when he sank to his knees and pulled one of her legs free of her jeans, he knew not to dive right in and attack her clit. Instead, he hiked her leg over his shoulder, pressed his face to her center and breathed her in. Slowly, as though savoring what he found there.

"Slayer mine," Spike said. "Always." Then he favored her exposed flesh with a long, soft lick that had her trembling from head to toe and back again.

"Oh, damn," Buffy heard herself gasp, threading her fingers through his hair and tugging him closer. He chuckled into her, and that felt good too, little vibrations edging across her skin and through her in ways she'd never experienced. "Oh..."

"Never get tired of how you taste," he murmured into her flesh before licking her again, then again, and again, each time with just a smidge more pressure than before. "The sounds you make for me."

Buffy threw her head back hard enough that it smacked into the wall at her back, but if there was any pain she didn't feel it. Didn't feel anything except Spike lapping at her with increasing urgency, doing things with his tongue that would have had a more self-conscious Buffy feeling exposed and vulnerable as she never had been, but this Buffy—the one without a world—couldn't find it in herself to care. Spike spreading her pussy open, sucking along her flesh, dipping his tongue into her and groaning as though he were the one being treated. Heat danced along her skin, lighting her from the inside out and chasing away that terrible, numbing cold. And the more she took, the more he gave. Fucking her first with his tongue, then sliding two wet fingers into her pussy and moaning when she clenched and bucked against him. He seemed content to watch her for a moment, breathing harder when she did, whimpering when she did, and by the time he finally turned his attention to her clit, she was throbbing and pulsing with need she'd never experienced before.

"There she is," Spike whispered into her flesh. "That's it, baby, give it to me. Let me feel you come."

He swirled his tongue around her clit once, twice, then closed his mouth around it and sucked. And it shouldn't have been that easy, but it was, and Buffy shuddered and clenched around his fingers as her body tumbled headfirst into pure ecstasy. Orgasms in the past had been something she experienced with no small amount of focus and concentration, but this one was effortless and all the stronger for it. She gasped and thrashed and thrust herself against his face, needing more but somehow also knowing more would have her ruined. And

Spike seemed to anticipate this as well, for he growled again and kept his fingers pumping into her, curling and stroking from the inside as he pressed his tongue down against her clit and let her ride out the shudders.

Then he was on his feet, his mouth hovering above hers, and the slick head of his cock danced a line between her folds.

"God, I love you," he said, hiking her into his arms and notching himself at her entrance. "Love you so much."

She felt like crying again, her eyes stinging once more, and she didn't know why. Only she did know why and that was worse. It was the way he said it, the way his voice shook around the words, how much he felt and how much of himself he poured into telling her, into something that seemed so far away from her at the moment she'd begun to doubt its existence. But it wasn't far away—it was here, right here. Spike pushing inside of her with a soft, sweet moan and tugging her down for a kiss. Kissing her still when he began pumping into her with deep strokes that chased down the last sparks of her orgasm and lit them up once more. Kissing her like he couldn't get enough of her mouth, like he needed her the way he needed blood.

It was wrong—*this* was wrong on multiple counts. But so was everything else.

Buffy wrapped her arms around his neck, curled her naked leg around his waist and leveraged her own strength to drive him into her at a pace that soon had her slammed between the hard wall at her back and the hard wall that was his chest. She felt leather dance along the inside of her thigh, followed by the scrape of denim and the metallic *thwap* of his belt buckle as he pounded into her, stretching her, filling her, over and over again. Again, he was the considerate one, remembering she needed to breathe, and pulled back so she could fill her lungs, his own grunts cadencing against her ears. He nipped and licked along her neck, again with the sort of expertise that told her they had done this a thousand times before. Knew just where to use his teeth and where she preferred tongue, where to suck and how much pressure to use. When he dipped his head to tease her breasts, it was with playful half-bites that charged through her as both too much and not enough—a balance no one had struck before.

"That's it, baby," Spike muttered, kissing his way up her collarbone and back to her mouth. "Squeeze me like that. Make it hurt."

Then he had one arm banded around her waist to keep her where he wanted her as his left hand wandered between them, slipped over the mound of her pussy and danced close to her clit. When she gasped, he flashed her a grin—that patented, smug-Spike grin that had driven her crazy for going on four years—and tugged on her lower lip with his teeth.

"Do it, Slayer. Come all over my cock. Let me know whose girl you are."

And before she could register what was happening, the blue of his eyes went yellow and he tore open the front of her blouse. A jolt of panic speared through her veins a second ahead of his fangs descending, and she didn't have time to stop—to shove him off—because he pressed down on her clit and bit into the upward slope of her breast, and everything in her went supernova. At once, she felt both more in tune with her body than she ever had been and ejected from it, the overload too much, frying her brain and taking the rest of her along with it. And for a second there, for a flash of an instant, Buffy touched pure bliss. Something completely divorced from the mess she'd left behind or the one staring her down. The strange world she'd landed inside didn't matter for that second, nor did whatever remained of the hopeful excitement she'd let herself believe in. All that mattered was this moment in which she was both dead and somehow more alive than she had ever been. With a vampire pulling her blood into his mouth, snarling his satisfaction around her torn flesh and pumping his hips once, twice more before his cock pulsed and she felt him spill inside of her.

It seemed like a long time passed before he spoke, but it was probably only seconds. Spike pulled his fangs back and favored the bite with a long lick, one that had her trembling with renewed need fast enough to give her whiplash. As though his tongue had feathered across her clit instead, and that must have been the intention, for he chuckled once more and kissed his way up her throat.

"How much longer until you can sneak off?" he asked, pulling back enough that his cock slipped out of her. That shouldn't have made her

whimper, but it did—shouldn't have made her want to drag him back to her, but it did. The already-wrong world was even wronger than she'd thought—she was bleeding from where his fangs had pierced her and semen was trickling down her inner thighs, and she wanted more of it. More of whatever that had been and especially that moment of utter bliss where she had been separated at last from everything that she was supposed to care about—everything that had been waiting for her when she crashed back to earth. Spike had been giving that to her in increments since she'd clawed her way to freedom, allowing brief windows of escape from the horror show that was her life, and that had been *good*, but this was so much better. That numb place she seemed to have made her home had burned away for a few glorious seconds. Forget the wishes, forget Angel, forget everything else—she needed more of *that*.

Buffy stumbled back, her eyes filling as her legs strained to keep her upright. Only this was wrong. Everything that had just happened was wrong.

He sensed the change in her—of course he did. The next second, he had her face cradled against his palm, his eyes, wide with concern, searching hers. "What is it, love?" he asked. "Talk to me."

For a second, she was terrified she would do just that—open her mouth and let everything spill. The world being wrong, the horrible mistake she'd made, the unfathomable grief threatening to burst at any moment, the confusion and fury at what she had waiting for her at home, disgust with herself for what she'd done here. But then he would know, wouldn't he? This Spike was just like her Spike, and he would see what her friends didn't see. What not even Angel could see. All the parts of her stripped down.

The first thing that managed to climb above the tangle of thoughts that comprised her mind, though, was also the easiest. Something Spike would understand, even if he couldn't understand the rest.

"I'm with Angel," she choked out.

His brow furrowed, something like annoyance flashing across his eyes. "Lemme guess," he muttered in what sounded like, of all things, a pout. "His poker mates decided they can't bloody stand him, either?

Told you it was just a matter of time before they gave him the old heave-ho."

Buffy blinked, her brain again stuttering to come up with a response. It was no good—there was nothing she could say. Nothing this world's Spike wouldn't already know. This world's Spike, with whom apparently she was having an affair. Who pulled her into maintenance closets and did things to her that she'd never entertained doing with anyone else, and probably a lot more if the way he was looking at her was any indication.

It was there again, pressing at the edges of her mind, the weight of the things she'd learned and the horror at all the things yet to discover. It was there and it wasn't alone, because underscoring everything was the unshakeable knowledge that the world she saw now was something she had created. A place where Giles was dead and Dawn was gone and Angel was here but not. Where Angel was *human* and they were married but she ran around on him, the way her father had run around on her mother.

God, she had to get out of there. *Now*.

"Let me go," Buffy said, pushing at Spike's chest, which was so much firmer than it had any right being.

He frowned, the annoyance that had been there at the mention of Angel slipping away in favor of concern. He dipped his head to catch her eye, his hand going to her face. "What's the matter?" he asked, trying to get her to look at him. She couldn't. "Slayer, tell me what's wrong."

"Let me *go*."

"Can't fix it if you won't talk to me."

"I don't need you to *fix* anything, Spike," Buffy snapped, shoving him again, this time with enough force to send him back against the opposing wall. "I need you to stay away from me."

She didn't look at him as she rushed past. Couldn't. Whatever she'd see there would be reserved for someone else. A Buffy she wasn't and didn't want to be.

A Buffy whose life was even more messed up than the one she'd left behind.

Buffy pushed her way through the crowd at the Bronze, not even

sparing a glance in the direction of the table she'd abandoned. The very air seemed to press down upon her, making it hard to move, harder to breathe, as though she were fighting her way through jello. By the time she toppled back outside, her heart was thundering hard enough her ribs hurt, and her lungs burned the way they still sometimes did when she recalled drowning.

But she couldn't stand still. While her friends might not come after her, Spike absolutely would. That was just the way he was. Tell him to drop something and he'd only hunt it down with more conviction. That he was involved with this world's Buffy meant she had seconds at best to put some distance between herself and the Bronze. If only her stupid brain could figure out where to go.

Stupid, stupid brain and its stupid twist of stupid logic. Buffy forced her legs forward, not sure where she was going but needing to move. If she kept moving, maybe something brilliant would occur to her. Maybe she would just know. That had been how she'd made it this far, after all. Putting one foot in front of the other, taking in breaths, surviving one endless moment after another, living from sunrise to sunset and hoping, eventually, she would be glad to open her eyes. Hoping, eventually, she would not wish they would remain closed forever.

The hardest thing in this world was living in it—she'd said that to Dawn, before. Right before. And at the time it had seemed wise and insightful. The world was a bitch, after all, and the last few years in Sunnydale had been an amalgamation of gut-punches to her personal life interspersed between thwarting attempts of global extinction. Dying the first time had been hard enough to come back from, knowing how tenuous that balance was between this world and the next, knowing how close she'd come to having the rest of her admittedly few years ripped out from under her. It had taken three months and some change to shake loose the malaise that had followed her out of the Master's lair, just in time for life to kick her again with everything that had happened with Angel. And that she had survived, thinking somewhat naively that things couldn't possibly get worse because the worst had already happened.

Killing Angel had nothing on the way she'd felt, though, when he'd

walked away from her. And *that* feeling, as much as it had hurt at the time, had been a trip to the freaking zoo compared to everything that had come after finding her mother dead on the couch. But by then, the end had been in sight—an end Buffy hadn't consciously prepared for but had known was there all the same. And that time when she said it couldn't get worse, she'd been right. She *should* have been right. Death was the absence of feeling—at least the sort of feelings that kept her tied to the ground, unable to move forward. Barely able to move at all. At last, she'd let go of pain—not just slayer pain, but all pain—and fulfilled what had always been the end of her story.

Now she could barely remember Heaven. Each day it seemed more and more like a really good, really bittersweet dream. Feeling that good. Feeling that happy. Feeling warm and loved and *okay*—all things she hadn't been since before she could remember. All things she wasn't certain she'd ever been, as even the good times she could remember had been bookended, if not completely overshadowed, by personal tragedy.

It had been dumb to think wishing things better would actually work. A thing Buffy from before, Buffy who hadn't known peace and warmth and completion, would never have tried. The stakes had been too high. Back then, she'd thought, felt, and experienced things as a person who had something to lose. Somehow in the midst of being ripped away from paradise, that sense of self-preservation, of overall good, of ownership and accountability had dulled. Or perhaps it hadn't come back with her. Perhaps she'd left it in her coffin, with the rest of the pieces that made her Buffy Summers.

Tomorrow, she decided, she would go back to the Magic Box and see if she could find the damn monkey's paw. Giles had bought it in order to destroy it—that much had stuck with her. Maybe destroying it would be like destroying Anya's thingamabob amulet or whatever from a thousand years ago—that was the way she'd lost her demon powers, right? Granted, destroying the paw would likely be a chore in itself, otherwise the paw would have been all with the destroyed well before Buffy could have mistaken it for a mummy hand.

Maybe Angel would know something. Her heart leaped at the thought. Once upon a time, she'd gone to Angel for help in matters

like these. He'd been around—he knew things. Even things Giles didn't know. Sometimes.

Buffy sucked in a breath and picked up her pace. And even if he didn't know anything, there was definitely something *she* needed to know. Something she doubted she'd be able to reconcile on her own.

How things had gone so badly in their marriage that she'd ever consider having an affair with anyone, let alone Spike.

Except the way Spike had touched her, stroked her, kissed her... She was pretty sure she'd never experienced that before. With anyone. It had been so easy, too, to let him take her away. To give in. To shut out everything and everyone and surrender. Those moments he'd been inside of her had chased away the cold and the numb, even the shock of the things she'd learned. She'd been someone else then, a someone who could possibly be happy if the life she came back to belonged to anyone other than Buffy Summers.

A shiver ran down her spine and she pressed her thighs together, trembling.

Those were thoughts she was better off not thinking.

ANGEL STILL WASN'T BACK when Buffy arrived. She didn't know what to make of that. Poker night with the guys—whoever this human-version of Angel's *guys* were—sounded like something that could go late. Well, if she were being honest with herself, it sounded like an excuse to get away from the house for a few hours. The sort of thing her father might have told her mother once upon a time before their marriage had officially fallen apart. She could be wrong, but given that this world's Buffy wasn't the faithful sort, she somehow doubted it.

The house at least looked a little less like a funhouse-mirror version of the one she called home when she walked back through the door. The subtle differences didn't throw her off course, though she did wrinkle her nose when she found evidence of Angel's snackathon still scattered across the living room floor. Okay, first things first, treat her mother's house with the care it deserved. Hopefully this world's Buffy left her broom and pan where she did.

Once the mess was cleaned up, and the living room more or less righted to the way it should look—though laden with knickknacks and doodads she didn't recognize—she turned her attention to the desk where her mother had always sat to balance her checkbook and write out the month's expenses. The one where Anya had sat not too long ago and advised her to start charging for slaying. That seemed like a likely place to stash important documents.

At the top of a stack of documents in the upmost drawer was a newspaper clipping, one bearing Giles's face. Buffy's heart seized and she crashed against the chair with a hard *thud,* gripping the loose piece of paper and pulling it out.

Rupert Edmund Giles

February 26, 1954 – October 13, 2001

One-time Sunnydale resident Rupert Giles was named as one of the victims of the deadly crash of UA Flight 31. Though born in England, Rupert spent many years in Sunnydale, and served as the high school's librarian in its final years. He is fondly remembered by many students and will be laid to rest in Sunnydale Cemetery on October 20, following a brief service held at the graveside at 2:00.

Buffy didn't realize she was crying until a droplet splattered across Giles's photo, making his eyes almost cartoonishly large. That moment when Giles had walked through the door, the first time she'd seen him since being forced to live again, had been an adrenaline shot to the soul. Or as close as she thought she might get these days. Just knowing he was near had made her world feel more manageable, even if there were things he could never know. Things she couldn't share.

He'd been killed in an airline crash. Because of her. He'd been coming back to see her, see her freshly resurrected and alive. The dates aligned with haunting significance. Buffy pressed her eyes closed, her skin heating and her sinuses burning, and she couldn't lose it. Not now. There was still so much to do. To look through. She needed answers.

But Giles was gone, and Angel wasn't here, and she had no idea when he'd get back. If he'd be open to talking to her at all after the way

he'd spoken to her before. If there was any of the man she'd known still inside the guy apparently sharing her space now.

At once, Buffy was tired. Exhausted, actually. Too much so to continue looking for she-didn't-know-what, all the things left unanswered swirling in her head, swirling, swirling, until the floor seemed to swirl too. In a life full of incredibly long days, this one had been the longest, and pushing forward was no longer an option. Except she had to push, didn't she? This was the world she'd made and she had to face it—had to fix it. Had to find Dawn or a way to put things right. She had to, *had to*, but she couldn't keep her eyes open.

Buffy stood and managed to stagger toward the couch, where she collapsed without ceremony. The cushions didn't smell right—smelled like stale beer. Add that to the list of things this reality had gotten wrong.

Her mother had once told her that things always seemed worse at night than they did in the morning, particularly if one was bone tired. It seemed like a long shot, but one worth taking.

And she was here for when Angel came home. He'd see her on the couch and they would talk.

If this world's Buffy was anything like her, Angel would be used to her not sleeping through until morning. Thus far, her nights had been plagued with dreams of waking up in her coffin, her lungs filling with dirt, the world so far away. She considered herself lucky if she only woke four or five times. Even luckier if the thing that pulled her out of sleep wasn't a nightmare, but something in the real world that would keep her nice and distracted from the place she'd just left.

She wondered if the grave was waiting for her again tonight.

And somewhat hoped it was.

5

BEING POOR WAS NOT SUCH A DRAG IN HINDSIGHT

IT WAS THE CRASH THAT DID IT, JARRED HER OUT OF SLEEP. THE place she'd been had been deep, as though she'd climbed into the concept of sleep itself and gotten lost along the way. But the air cracked and split, piercing through the cocoon she'd managed to wrap herself inside, and Buffy exploded into wakefulness so hard she jolted off the couch and slammed onto the floor.

"Ow."

She didn't know what she expected in the seconds that followed, but she got precisely nothing. No one rushed in to see if she was all right, no one called out to see what had happened, no one did anything except whatever they had already been doing. In this case, muttering curses in the kitchen while sweeping up what sounded like glass fragments. Normally, Buffy busting her own butt just by waking up was a thing Dawn would relish until she inevitably did something even more embarrassing and shut up out of fear of retribution. Normally.

But this wasn't normal. This wasn't even her world. And that wasn't Dawn in the kitchen.

Buffy sighed and sat up, rubbing the place where her spine had hit the floor. Sunlight was streaming through the drapes, bright enough

that she knew it hadn't just risen. Her body ached in a familiar way, a *you-slept-on-the-couch-all-night* way. That hadn't happened in... Well, she didn't know how long.

Apparently Angel had walked into the house last night and either not noticed or not cared that his wife wasn't in bed beside him. Or maybe that was too harsh—maybe this world's Buffy had indeed experienced the same stretch of nightmare-fueled intermittent insomnia and Angel had assumed it was better to let her sleep there than disturb her.

That was something her Angel would do, at least. No, her Angel would have done the romance hero thing where he gathered her in his arms and carted her upstairs, somehow without jostling her from her sleep.

Buffy scowled and climbed to her feet, wobbling a bit with the aftereffects of her very first post-resurrection sleep hangover. It was nice, feeling off-balance for reasons other than being alive when she should be dead, though she doubted it would last long. Especially as memories of the previous night filtered in, bringing with them all the things she needed to do, questions that still needed answering, and what she'd intended to talk to Angel about the night before.

Angel. One thing was certain—she had to get *her* Angel out of her head, because that was not who she was dealing with. The guy in the other room, moving around and lumbering about in the kitchen, was not the Angel she'd known, and certainly not the one she'd loved. She could assume they shared some traits and maybe even memories, but this was a different world, which meant nothing was certain.

Buffy swallowed and pressed herself forward until she was in the doorway. "Hey," she said weakly.

Angel, who was busy punching the dials on the microwave, didn't so much as glance her way. "We need a new coffeepot."

She glanced at the coffeemaker. The pot was indeed gone. "Was that what broke?"

"Some splashed on my hand." This came out sharp, defensive, like she was accusing him of something. Still, he didn't look at her. "So when you're out, new coffee pot."

When she was out, implying she would be leaving soon. Buffy crossed her arms. "Any reason you can't handle that?"

Now he did look at her, and not with surprise as she might have thought, but rather with the tired expression of a man who had already had this fight in the past and was resigned to the fact that he'd have it again. "I'd love to," he said dryly. "Except I'm not allowed to run errands anymore. Or are you giving me back checkbook privileges?"

Checkbook privileges? What sort of suburban hell had this world's Buffy been trapped inside? Good lord, no wonder she'd started banging the enemy.

The urge was there to tell him *yes* and deal with the fallout later—hell, she already regretted that she hadn't just agreed to handle the task herself. But if Angel wasn't to be trusted with money, and money was one of those things that had made Buffy's wish-list, giving him carte blanche on her wallet sounded like a great way to have wasted one of the wishes.

"I'll take care of it," Buffy muttered, tucking a clump of hair behind her ear. The dull look he threw her now, one that all but screamed, "Yeah, that figures," should have hurt but it didn't. The only thing she felt was a mild twinge of annoyance.

Strange when, at one point, the thought that she could disappoint Angel would have been devastating. But then, this wasn't *really* Angel. It was some bastardization of the man she'd loved. Maybe something had happened when he'd turned human, some personality shift or whatnot.

Then again, the look he was giving her now was a very Angel look. Just not one she'd ever seen aimed at her. Not something she wanted to think about.

"So," she said, hoping she sounded somewhat casual, "how was poker night? Win big?"

"Didn't lose big, if that's what you're after."

"It's not." She paused, begging the cosmos for patience. "I just... didn't hear you come in."

"Yeah. You were sleeping pretty hard. No nightmares, I take it."

"No. No nightmares." Not unless you counted the one she was currently living in, of course. "What are you going to do today?"

Another one of those narrowed, skeptical looks, like he thought she was trying to corner him. "What is this?" he said slowly. "You've been acting strange since last night."

"Define strange."

"Well, like that. Saying things like that."

"What, you mean, talking?"

"We don't *talk*, Buffy. We haven't talked in a long time."

The microwave beeped, but for the first time, she seemed to have Angel's undivided attention. He kept his gaze fixed on her.

"I know you blame me for Dawn," he said after a long beat. "I... blame me too. But I also blame Willow. And Xander. And Tara and Anya. If any of them had said anything, believe me, we wouldn't be having this conversation right now."

That she did believe. A mutual distrust in all things magic was pretty much the only thing Angel and Spike had in common. If Angel had known that Buffy's death was less a period on her story and more an ellipsis, he would never have shipped Dawn off anywhere. No matter what this universe had done to make Angel the way he was now, she had complete faith in that.

But then something else occurred to her—something that left her hollow.

"We wouldn't be having this conversation because I wouldn't be here," Buffy said, crossing her arms. "If you'd known, you would have tried to stop them. I know that."

Angel grunted and turned toward the microwave, the cracks she'd managed to make in his stony façade sealing right back up. "I told you I won't have this argument again. And I'd really appreciate it if you stopped acting like I sent her somewhere terrible. He's your father. It was the right thing to do. And honestly, if you'd listened to me the first time around, that whole thing with Glory would never have—"

"Stop."

"You're too young to be raising a teenager. Do you really think that's what your mom—"

"My mother begged me to protect her," Buffy shot back, clenching her hands into fists. Anger, good and righteous, sparked under her skin—anger that had been festering there, burning, toward herself and the

stupid thing she'd done and the world she'd made, and Angel had just dumped a bucket of kerosene on the flame, knowingly or not. "Whether or not she was actually my sister, her *daughter*. I did what I had to do."

"And I maintain that being around *you* was what put her in danger in the first place. The monks sent her to you for a reason. Glory knew you had the Key. Seemed the best way to protect the Key was to—oh, I dunno—*not* have it." He punched the microwave open with enough force that she thought he might have broken it. He definitely would have broken it had he been at full vamp strength. "But no. Buffy knows best. Buffy *always* knows best."

"How can you say that?"

"You're right. The last three years speak for themselves." He practically tore whatever he'd been cooking out of the microwave. It looked like a TV dinner, film clinging to the carton, steam wafting upward. "But go ahead. Hate me for doing what was in her best interest. Hate me for seeing what no one else saw—doing the thing none of your *friends* were willing to do. I didn't ask for this."

"And she did? And *I* did?"

"You're damn right, you did," Angel snapped, his eyes blazing now. "And that's what it comes back to, isn't it? Even now, you can't stand that I was right. That your little fairytale fantasy didn't come true, that real life ended up being something a little less than perfect. I was *there*, Buffy. I was ready to make the sacrifice, make the hard decision. I was ready to do the right thing and you're the one who stopped me. You want someone to blame for the mess you're in? Start with a mirror."

She didn't have to know what the hell he was talking about for the words to land their punch—it was in his eyes, in the resentment that shook his voice. There had been plenty of times in their shared past when Angel had been pissed with her, but always beneath the hurt and the anger had been an undercurrent of love. Those arguments had been painful, yes, but she'd thought more so because they loved each other so much, and fighting with someone you loved could be nothing but painful.

This was different, though. That undercurrent wasn't just missing, it didn't exist. Angel didn't love her.

The certainty she felt about that rocked her foundation. One thing Angel had told her, damn well beaten her down with, was the fact that for him, he could never move on. And for so long she'd clung to that, knowing that the person she was supposed to be with wanted to be with her too. That if things were different, there wouldn't be a divide between their worlds—that he would choose her and continue to choose her every day for the rest of their lives. That his moving away *had* been his way of choosing her, ultimately. Choosing to do what was best for her rather than what they both wanted.

When Buffy snapped back to herself, she was no longer in the kitchen. She was in the upstairs bathroom and had no idea how she'd gotten there. If she'd just walked away from him on autopilot, which seemed likely, given the daze she was in. All she knew was she'd been staring at him one second and the next, she was looking at herself in the mirror. Studying the face of a woman who was not her, a woman who had a wedding band on her finger—a woman who was miles away from Buffy Summers.

She peeled her top over her head, and immediately her gaze went to the healing bite mark above her breast. The place where Spike had sunk his fangs the night before. Somehow, in the midst of everything else, she'd managed to completely disregard the finer details of what had happened in that maintenance closet. Spike touching her, stroking her, kissing her and whispering all sorts of things into her hair, not hesitating to mark her when his fangs descended. Everything that had happened in that span of seconds had completely eclipsed every sexual encounter Buffy had had up until that point. Rough but sweet, desperate but tender, and brutal while also somehow loving—she didn't think any man had ever come near as close, and that thought was terrifying, because it had been Spike. Not even her Spike, the Spike who had been sharing her silences and shouldering her burdens, but a Spike that belonged to a different world. A different Buffy.

A Buffy who had a husband who apparently hated her, and one she might hate right back.

At length, Buffy tore herself from the mirror and made quick work shedding the rest of her clothes. Then on came the shower and inside

she went, ready—desperate, even—to wash off the conversation she'd just had, and the confusing night that had preceded it.

She had a monkey's paw to find and a few wishes to undo, not to mention a life waiting for her, even if it was stuck in the loop from hell.

That loop was better than this.

FOR SOME REASON, Buffy was surprised to find the Magic Box more or less the way she'd left it. Part of her had earnestly thought, or rather hoped, that stepping out of her house and making the usual walk to the shop would turn the world right-side up again. That if she believed it hard enough, she could push the door open as she would any other day, have her arrival announced by the tinkling of the overhead bell, and find Anya and Giles squabbling over how to best categorize the potions manuals. The *pretend everything is all right and it will be* approach had never once done anything for her, but there was a first time for everything.

But of course, that wasn't what she found. She found a closed-up shop with shuttered windows. A locked door that she had a key to for some reason, and a whole lot of empty waiting on the other side.

Only, wait, not so empty. The door that led to the training room was open and there was definite rustling going on. Buffy frowned and pressed the front door closed, then made her way across the empty space, between the few tables, and had just about breached the threshold when Anya stepped in her way, a full-to-the-brim cardboard box cradled in her arms.

"Oh, penis!" Anya snapped, trying to maintain her grip on the box but not managing. It went tumbling to the floor, and though the *thump* was a hard one, it wasn't accompanied by the sound of anything shattering. So, no damage done.

"Buffy," Anya said, breathing hard and giving her a death glare. "My human sensibilities might be rusty, but I believe it is considered rude to not announce yourself when you enter a space where you may acci-

dentally cause someone to drop something heavy that might, say, break their foot. I'd have had grounds for a lawsuit, you know. I could have taken you for every penny Giles left you, and then some. God knows I deserve it."

It had nearly been twenty-four hours since she'd stepped into this world she'd created—twenty-four hours of discoveries too large for her head, too much for any one person to handle. And because she was an idiot, she'd been almost certain that the biggest news bombs had already been dropped.

"Giles...left me money," she echoed, knowing she sounded stupid but unable to help herself. The rest of it locked into place. That awful, hot sensation that had chased her home from the Bronze crept up on her again, spreading across her skin, making her stomach twist and her heart seize.

She'd wished for money. Her wish had killed Giles.

She had killed Giles.

Buffy's legs trembled. She wasn't certain how much longer she could remain upright—the floor seemed to pull at her, like gravity was suddenly sentient.

"Yes, no need to rub it in," Anya was saying when she clued back in—not that she wanted to. She just didn't have a choice. "You were dead for nearly five months and did he *once* think to—I don't know—take your name off his accounts? His titles and lien agreements? Anything, including the store, that was supposed to be *mine*? No. Of course not. I was only his partner. I was only the person here who gave a damn about this place."

Buffy blinked burning eyes, her throat going tight. "I care about the Magic Box," she said, her mind, the bastard that it was, dragging her back to that first day when she'd walked in to the image of Giles ready for his very first customer. He'd been standing in the middle of the shop, wearing magician's robes and a pointy, purple hat, his expression somewhere between dejection and determination.

Giles was gone and it was all her fault.

"Yeah," Anya said, "you care. You care so much you boarded up the shop and refused to sell it to me. It's no big deal, just my life's work.

But that doesn't matter, does it? Because everything is in Buffy's name."

That didn't make any sense to her. In the other world—the real one, the right one—Buffy was fairly certain Anya had been made partner. Or something. Giles had certainly left, not intending to return, from what the others had told her, and the shop had been up and running. Maybe that wasn't the way it had been in this reality... Or maybe her Giles hadn't gotten around to making things official where Anya's ownership was concerned.

But even if that was the case, sense was still not being made. If Giles's death was the price of her not having to worry about money, shutting down the shop was not the way to go about it. Unless this world's Buffy had closed the doors to find the mysterious thing that Angel and Spike had asked her about now, though what that could be, she had no clue. It had to be important, whatever it was.

"Everything is in my name," Buffy repeated, her gaze falling on the box in Anya's arms, several other things falling into place. The things Willow and Xander had said the night before, things she hadn't understood. If there was something at the Magic Box that Buffy needed to find, and knowing Anya as she did...

"How did you get in here?" she asked suddenly, straightening her spine. It was a total shot in the dark, but given the way Anya's face fell, one that hit its mark.

There was a terse silence in which Anya just glared at her, but ultimately sniffed and looked away the way she did whenever she was in the wrong. "The key you confiscated only opens the front door," she said stiffly. "As any *true* owner of the Magic Box would know. The back door—"

Buffy held out a hand. "Key. Now. And the box too."

"Don't worry," Anya said, brushing past her with a huff. For a moment, Buffy thought she meant to storm right out the door, but she veered to the left and placed the box on the vacant cash-wrap before taking out her keychain. "Nothing in here is yours. I didn't go near your precious basement."

"Still," she said, her tone firmer than she felt, "you know what we talked about."

Another silence, this one colder and more awkward, filled as it was with Anya's grunts and struggles wrangling the other key free of the keychain. Once it was off, she slammed it against the counter hard enough that Buffy knew her hand had to hurt, but Anya didn't so much as flinch.

"You never gave my proposal a chance," the former demon said. "It was so easy for you."

"Believe me, *none* of this has been easy." Buffy didn't object when Anya gathered the box in her arms, though part of her thought she should. But then she remembered what Xander had said about having to live with her, and figured it was likely that this encounter was going to be big on Anya's List of Grievances when he got home. If there was something in that box she needed, she could hunt Anya down later. Make a real enemy out of her. Why not? She was on a roll.

"You wouldn't know it," Anya said, shaking her hair back. "I have done a lot of horrible things, Buffy. Things even you can't imagine. But it was never personal to me. Not once. Well, okay, once. And sure, I enjoy reaping vengeance on unworthy males—fine. Yet to do this to a friend? Low. Even by demonic standards."

"I'm sorry," she said, having nothing else. And she was sorry, after all. For sins Anya had no idea she had committed. "For what it's worth."

"Nothing. It's worth exactly nothing if you're not willing to fix it."

Anya paused and looked at her expectantly, but only for a moment. Whatever this was, they'd had the conversation enough times for her to have the lines and arguments down. Instead, she shook her head and started toward the front.

"That's what I thought," she said as her parting shot before helping herself out, box and all. The sound of the door swinging shut behind her might as well have been a cannon in the otherwise empty space. It certainly seemed to have the impact of one.

For a beat, Buffy didn't know what to do. She stood in the middle of the store she apparently owned, her overfilled brain spinning with new information. It took practically no time at all for her temples to start to throb or for the floor to become a moving target.

Giles's absence hit her again, a sucker-punch to the gut. She kept

thinking of him as *gone,* the way he'd been *gone* when she'd clawed her way out of her coffin. The time that had followed, after her thoughts had steadied and she'd realized she was alive again, had been a vacuum. All she'd wanted in those days that followed was a parent. A grown-up. Someone who was in charge and wasn't her who could take the lead and make the tough calls and just give her the room she needed to adjust to living again. Someone the others could look to when things went wrong, to know how to move forward in the face of unbeatable odds.

He'd been gone, but he'd come home. In this world that wasn't her world, he would never come home. He was just gone.

But maybe not if she found the damn monkey's paw. If she found it, then she had a chance of undoing the damage she'd done. She had to.

The downstairs was just as chaotic as it had been the day before, and for a moment, Buffy just stood at the top step, staring blankly at the towers of merchandise and feeling more than a little overwhelmed in the task before her. She had a vague idea of where she'd been when the lights had gone out, when the wishes had been granted, but the prospect of getting there seemed herculean. Hell, she knew she'd carved her way toward the door yesterday, pushed rolling carts aside and likely knocked over a few things, but if she had, she couldn't tell from up here.

Nope, she needed to do some deep-sea diving.

Buffy couldn't say how long she looked. Once she started digging, doing her best not to knock anything over, she lost sense of time. There were too many tricks her mind could play on her down here. The usual tricks, like if a certain statue looked familiar and if that meant she was near where she'd been the day before, and the not-so-usual tricks, those involving questions about the other objects that were down here and what further damage could she do, even by accident. In the end, she wasn't even certain she'd managed to get anywhere near the place she'd been yesterday, and cursed herself for leaving when she had, when things had still been fresh. What kind of moron takes the express bus to a new dimension and leaves without making sure the return ticket is secure?

Not that she knew there was a return ticket or any kind of ticket. But god, there had to be.

There *had* to be.

By the time she managed to convince herself that sticking around would do her no favors—at least for now, mentally exhausted as she was—the sun was well on its way to setting and she still had a coffeepot to pick up. A coffeepot because her husband had broken the one they had. Her husband who evidently wasn't to be trusted with money, but that was okay because her surrogate father had kicked the bucket and she was rolling in it as a result. Yay her.

Though she hadn't eaten anything at all today, Buffy felt like she could vomit.

At the top of the stairs once more, she turned to survey the scene below her. The jumble of stuff and things she had inherited, things she didn't know what to do with, hadn't the first clue how to sort or manage. Giles had left that to her. And for some reason, she'd shoved everything into the basement, where it was damn near impossible to move, let alone find anything. The number of questions she had kept growing.

Questions she was damn near certain she didn't want the answers to, but the longer she was here, the less choice she had.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to the basement, exhaustion joining forces with defeat and making her eyes swell again. "I'm so sorry."

It came too late, the tickle along the back of her neck. Then he was there, right behind her, and despite herself—despite everything—everything that was wrong with the world seemed to relax. It made no sense, absolutely none, but it was true all the same. For some reason, her world or this one, Spike was the key to silencing the screams in her head.

"Slayer," he said softly, lightly gripping her shoulder. "Sweetheart, been goin' outta my mind. What's wrong? Did I do something—say something?"

"Why is it always you?" She didn't mean to say it—the words just rolled off her tongue. "No matter where I go, it's always you."

She heard him swallow, heard the way his breath trembled when he

released it, unneeded as it was. "Tell me what to do. Anything, pet, you know that. I'm yours to command."

That was too much—it was all too much. Him. This place. The things he was saying. Everything that waited for her back out there. The jumbled mess that was her head. All of it.

She couldn't handle it. Couldn't handle any of this right now.

So she tore away from him and ran.

IS MY MALFUNCTION SO SURPRISING 'CAUSE I ALWAYS SEEM SO STABLE AND BRIGHT?

She didn't get very far, of course. Spike had let her run off before without chasing her down—there was no way she was getting away with that two nights in a row.

"Buffy... Bloody hell, Buffy!"

She made it as far as the door, was in the process of pulling it open when Spike slammed a hand on the wood and shoved it back into place. Then he whirled her around, and she met his eyes for the first time that night, not wanting to see what was there but unable to look away all at the same time. Because what was there was fear, and *fear* was something she'd rarely seen on him. Something he'd rarely shown her.

"Baby, talk to me," he said, his voice pitched at an octave she hadn't heard before. An octave that matched the fear in his eyes—desperate, imploring. "You're not pickin' up the notes. Not leavin' any, either. I'm at the end of my bloody tether here. Tell me what's wrong."

And that was it. Something in her snapped—the tattered strings of whatever had been holding her together, whatever had allowed her to go this far. She was gone. Bye-bye Buffy. And all of it, everything, came rushing up.

"What's wrong?" she shouted, shoving Spike back so that he went

stumbling across the vacant floor and into one of the abandoned tables. "What's wrong? How about *everything,* Spike? All I wanted was for things to be a little better. A little more manageable to make me not feel like I was better off in that coffin. That's all! But what do I get? I get a mummy-hand loop that won't end, that's what I get. I get landed in a loveless marriage with the guy I thought was the *one* for me. I get friends who are mad at me and Giles is dead and I'm apparently the owner of the Magic Box and Angel sent Dawn off to my *father* when you—*you*—spent all summer watching over her. I get all that. I try to make the world better because I'm a complete idiot and better *doesn't exist*. That's what's wrong."

She didn't get a chance to take in his expression, see how the words hit, because the rest of it came crashing down and it took her along for the ride. Buffy didn't fall so much as stagger, straight into Spike's arms, not meaning to go there but also meaning to, in some way. Tears burned her eyes and scalded down her cheeks. She hadn't cried much at all since being resurrected, hadn't let herself. Crying meant handling and handling was something she wasn't doing very well, except now she didn't have a choice because her body had made it for her. And now that she'd started, she had the horrible feeling that stopping was out of the question. That she'd stand here and listen to herself making those awful noises she hadn't made since locking herself in the bathroom following her mother's funeral and letting go. It had been the only time she'd had.

Spike grabbed her as she knew he would, keeping her from collapsing to the floor and pulling her against his chest. Hugging her, stroking the back of her head in a way that wasn't familiar but felt it just the same. Like she had spent a lot of time here, her head against his shoulder, his hands on her as he rumbled little incoherent nothings that were still somehow somethings.

"Not a lick of that made any sense, hope you know," he muttered when she began to calm, when the breaths shuddering through her lips sounded and felt more like actual breaths than desperate gasps. "Not a sodding bit of it."

Buffy rested her head against his shoulder, squeezing her eyes closed. Maybe if she kept absolutely still, she could just stay here.

Right here in this moment forever. It wasn't perfect but now that she'd gotten it all out, cried as much as she could for the time being, it felt strangely okay, and she knew what was coming would be worse.

She cleared her throat, trying to gather her bearings, knowing it was a lost cause. "What could I say right now that would make sense?"

"After last night? Bloody hell, you got me. Way you ran off, I wagered Red was messin' with the mojo again, tryin' to put things right." He trailed his fingers down her spine. "Never learns her lesson, that girl. But that's not it."

"How do you know?"

"Came after you, didn't I? Bloody near barreled her over tryin' to get out. Thought for a mo' she mighta caught wise, the way she was lookin' at me." At that, Spike pulled back in full, gripping her firmly by the arms. "Keep tellin' you it's gonna happen."

"What?"

"Your mates sussing it out. That all good Angel's for is takin' off and comin' back 'round when no one wants him here." He gave her a soft grin, one that spoke of intimacy well beyond sex. She didn't know how she knew, but she did. There was just so much there. "Small bloody wonder he hasn't cottoned on, himself. But that's not what's botherin' you so *talk* to me."

Buffy wet her lips, her gaze following his. Talk to him. That was all she'd been doing for a while now—using him as her confessional, the keeper of all her secrets. How he had become that, she didn't know, but unlike everything else in the world, it felt right. Good, even. Those moments she stole away with Spike made her feel something other than dead inside.

This Spike wasn't that Spike, though. Except he was. Just a Spike who touched her without hesitation, said things without weighing his words, fucked her and called her his. Also, and she couldn't believe this was *just* occurring to her, the chip hadn't gone off when he'd sliced his fangs into her breast.

There was so much she didn't know, so much she *needed* to know. And he was the only one she could talk to. Change all of reality and that remained the same. Somehow, it didn't surprise her.

"I messed up," she whispered. "Spike, I messed everything up."

His eyes were warm but the kiss he pressed against her cheek was cool. "So we'll put things right. Not the first time."

"It's not that simple. I mean I *really* messed up."

"Nothin' we can't fix, pet. Should know that by now."

The smile he gave her was so tender, full of so much confidence and *love* it hurt to look at. And it answered a question she'd had, one she'd buried deep under a mountain of other questions. That this world's Buffy had been having an affair with Spike was something she'd managed to accept without much needing convincing, but part of her had assumed that was because of the torrent of confused feelings she'd brought with her when she'd made those wishes. It wasn't. Whatever they had, the two of them, was something real.

Knowing that hurt, too. That the something real wasn't hers.

"Can we go somewhere else?" Buffy asked, stepping back and rubbing her arms. "I...need to pick up a coffeepot. Angel broke ours."

He rolled his eyes and scoffed. "Of course he did, big wanker."

"And...I don't think I've eaten today." In fact she knew she hadn't. Until now she hadn't thought she'd be able to keep anything down.

"Come on, then. Lock up here and Spike'll take care of you."

Buffy almost started crying again but somehow managed to shove the urge back down. "You won't want to when I'm done."

He scoffed, cupped her cheeks and kissed her. A soft, sweet kiss, like the soft, sweet looks he'd been sending her. A kiss that, much like those looks, she didn't deserve. "Keep tryin' to run me off. Never learn, do you?"

No, she supposed she never did.

But that was just one of her problems.

❧

IF THERE WERE any questions as to the seriousness of her relationship with Spike in this world, they were banished the second she stepped into his crypt.

It *was* his crypt. The same one he called home in her world, only with a few additions. A rug that had been in her mom's gallery stretched across the living area he'd set up, along with one of her

mother's favorite lamps. A few pieces of art, both from the gallery and her house, were on the walls, making the place look more like a home than her own did at the moment. The furniture was different, too—not the green-upholstered stuff she was used to, but pieces that looked a bit more cared for, like they might have come from somewhere other than the landfill. There was also a weapon's chest that she recognized as hers being used as an end-table. A battle-axe and a few other choice pieces—her favorites—mounted on the walls within easy reach, should she need to grab something in a flash.

This Spike also had a full kitchen nook, something she would have thought impossible for a literal hole in the ground. There was the fridge, as it was in her world, but boxed in with a couple of tables—one that held a microwave and a toaster, the other with a selection of plates, mugs, glasses, and assorted cutlery. There was a shelf tucked into the corner as well, filled with various nonperishables—and all her favorites, she realized—as well as a plastic bin filled with dirty, albeit soapy water, next to a bottle of Ajax and a sponge.

Holy cow.

This place was her place too. She saw herself in every corner, every detail. It wasn't just serious with Spike in this world—it was... God, she didn't know if there were words for what this was.

They weren't having an affair. They had a whole secret life.

Or maybe not-so-secret. Did Angel know after all? Was that the reason he looked at her the way he did?

The thought bloomed and died just as quickly. If Angel knew about Spike, he would have brought it up earlier. Would have thrown it in her face—wouldn't have hesitated. And if what Spike had said earlier was anything to go off, none of her friends knew, either. Must be that none of them ever came by here—the décor alone would be a dead giveaway.

Spike marched over to the kitchen nook without stopping to gawk at the place and placed the to-go sack he'd ordered on the front-facing table. "Grab a plate, Slayer," he said, pulling out cartons of steamy Italian goodness. That had been another giveaway—he hadn't asked what she was hungry for, just headed to her favorite bistro, ordered her favorite dish, and paid using actual money. When she'd just stared at the ten-dollar bill he'd placed on the counter, he'd grunted, rolled his

eyes, and tossed a few singles on top as a tip, muttering something about bossy women stealing his dosh.

Buffy edged forward, feeling like she might break this reality if she moved too fast. She remembered how she'd thought of coming here last night—how she'd hesitated because she wasn't sure she would be able to handle learning Spike was gone in this world. It was a damn good thing she hadn't come. Seeing all of this would have left her paralyzed.

By the time she'd made it to the kitchen nook, Spike had her baked ziti piled onto a plate and garnished with a thick slice of cheesy garlic bread. He'd also ordered a side of toasted ravioli, which he was busy arranging on another plate around a small helping of marinara. A shrill *ding* pierced the air and she realized he'd also had the microwave running, heating up a glass full of blood.

It was so domestic. All of it.

It was too much.

"Have you ever heard of a monkey's paw?" Buffy blurted before she lost her nerve.

Spike met her gaze, blinked. "What are you on about?"

"Monkey's paw."

"Yeah, Slayer, I heard you the first time. You're askin' me if I'm familiar with the bloody thing you've been tearin' the shop apart to find these last few days? Yeah. Mighta come up once or twice."

"The monkey's paw is what I'm looking for at the Magic Box." Buffy released a deep breath, not sure what to do with this information.

"Yeah," Spike said slowly, the confusion in his gaze hardening into more of that unbearable concern. "Gonna ask one more time and give it to me straight. Has Red started dabblin' again? She actually try that sodding time voodoo she was blatherin' on about at the funeral? 'Cause Anya had the right of it—nothin' good can come from—"

"Why? Why am I looking for it?"

"The bleeding hell do you mean, why—"

"Because I *have* to find it. I have..." She trailed off, shaking her head. The more she talked, the more worried he looked. There was no dancing around this. If this world's Buffy had been looking for the

monkey's paw, that had to mean something. Maybe she'd found it. Maybe she'd used it. Maybe she was living in Buffy's world right now, stuck in a loop that wouldn't end. Maybe they'd just swapped places. *Maybe, maybe, maybe.* She had to get something definitive. And to do that, he needed to know everything. "Spike, I used it. The monkey's paw. I used it."

Something shifted behind his eyes—one part shock, the other part alarm, and the other part outrage. "You *what*?" he snapped, slamming down the glass of blood before rounding the table so he could seize her by the shoulders. "What the *hell* were you thinking? You know how sodding dangerous that is—"

"I was desperate. I was stuck and I couldn't get out. I had to."

"Bugger that. Sweetheart, we talked about this. Went over it. You're tellin' me—"

"I'm telling you that I used it and *this* is where I ended up." Buffy forced herself to hold his gaze. "I used it and suddenly my life looks like *this*."

That seemed to steal the wind from his sails. He released her, staggering back a step. "Sorry?"

"This." Buffy gestured at the crypt around them—the crypt that he'd decorated with her mother's things, with her weapons chest and her favorite axe and stuffed full of foods on the Buffy-friendly menu. This entire, impossible crypt that existed in what should have been an impossible world. "I was at the Magic Box and there was this customer who wanted a mummy hand and I found the monkey's paw by mistake. Anya told me it granted wishes and that Giles had bought it so that he could get rid of it, and then... I don't *know* what happened, but time just started to go in circles and I was stuck living the same twenty minutes over and over again and it was too much. It was all too much, and I couldn't get out of it, so I decided to use the monkey's paw. See if making wishes would change anything and it did. As soon as all the wishes were done, the lights went out and I landed *here*. Here where... nothing makes sense and Giles is dead and Angel is *human* and I have to get out. I *have* to get out of here."

She stopped talking almost as abruptly as she'd started, the air ringing with the absence of her voice. And then the absence of

anything, save the awful way Spike was looking at her, the horror filling his eyes, the echo of his breaths, harsh and rapid against a backdrop of nothing. She didn't like it, that look or the fact that she understood it. Ever since Heaven, Spike had been the one stable thing in her world. Unflappable, supportive, *there*, ready to listen or talk or distract or whatever she needed, and likely more where that came from.

"You're not Buffy," he said at last, a note of panic in his voice. "You're not *Buffy*."

"What? I am Buffy. I am very much Buffy. Buffy Anne Summers, there's a headstone with my name on it and everything. I'm just not... the Buffy you know."

Spike was shaking his head, backing away from her. "Bloody hell," he muttered, his gaze lowered. Then *snap*. Something in him went off, and he became a blur of motion. In a blink, the plate of ravioli he'd just prepared went hurtling into the nearest wall, chased by a tortured, guttural roar. The air cracked as plate shattered, an explosion of crumbs and marinara tumbling amidst shards of ceramic to the stone floor. He was still moving, though, tearing into a frenzied pace she knew well, his face a mask of anger and heartbreak. And she didn't know what to do—if there was anything to do. She needed answers, couldn't keep running on pieces of history she didn't remember living, and like it or not, Spike was her connection. The only one she could trust.

"Spike, I know this is...a lot, but—"

"A lot," he snarled, rounding on her with eyes that were breaking. "A *lot*."

"I know. I know—"

"Where the bleeding hell is she?"

"I...I don't know." Buffy held up her hands, closing her eyes, hoping to find some spare strength inside. Or at the very least, the right combination of words to make him understand. "I made my wish and I was at the Magic Box. Only the Magic Box was different—everything's in the basement and I... I don't know, Spike. I don't know how any of this works."

"Right. So naturally, you go and muck with a bit of dark magic and pop into a world that's not yours. Takin' things that aren't yours.

Taking *people*...” He glared at her a moment longer, then pressed the heel of his palm against his brow. “Bloody hell, Slayer, why did you let me do it? Am I somethin’ to you, where you’re from? Are *we* something? Is that why?”

Buffy furrowed her brow, not trusting she knew what he was talking about. Except of course she knew what he was talking about—it just didn’t make sense. Spike loved her, that she knew without question anymore, had accepted at some point as fact rather than the delusions of a twisted vampire, but...

But there was no but. There was the logic in her head that clearly didn’t match the logic here. She had no excuse. And worse, she had nowhere to hide. Not from him and certainly not from herself—whatever game of chicken she’d been playing with her own damn resolve since being resurrected. How she sought him out every night, how all the weight of expectation she felt when around the others rolled away when she was with him. That he loved her was a relief, a comfort, and an almost unspeakable temptation. Something that had started, if she were being honest, after he’d made it clear that he’d do anything he could to protect her and her sister, even if it meant dusting. Even if she never loved him back. Spike had started looking different to her then—not an enemy, but an ally. An ally who would follow her lead and give her what she needed without thought or question.

When Spike had kissed her last night, it had felt like the natural destination of a journey she hadn’t wanted to admit she was on, right or wrong. Mostly wrong, because *it* was wrong—whatever she was feeling at the moment—but good enough that she hadn’t been able to summon the strength to pull back. Falling into him had been easy and cathartic. She’d needed it.

“We’re...not together, if that’s what you’re asking,” she said a moment later. “But it’s kinda fuzzy, in my head.”

“So fuzzy you’ll let a bloke shag your bloody brains out just for kicks?”

“Look, I was losing my mind there last night. Giles is dead. *Dead*. Angel is... I don’t even know, but nothing in this world makes sense to me and then you were there and it—my mind just went quiet. It *always* goes quiet when I’m around you.”

"Glad to be of service."

It had been a damn long time since Spike had looked at her with anything other than utter and complete devotion. And that, maybe more than anything that she had seen or experienced since arriving in this bizarro-world version of her life, chilled her to her core. Because both in this world and in the one she called home, Spike was the one constant—the one person she knew she could count on. More than her friends, more than Giles, more than Angel. Losing him was like losing the piece that had been holding her together.

"I'm sorry," she said before she could think on it too much, wonder if this was a first—had she ever apologized to Spike for anything?—but meaning it all the same. "You... You love me. Or the Spike I know does. Ever since dying, you—he's—the only person I can really be around at all. Everyone else is just too much. They expect so much and they don't know, they can't, and I try to keep it together around them—be the Buffy they know. The Buffy they want, the one they think was in a hell dimension. You let me be me, the only me I can be right now, and I need that. I *want* that." She paused, swallowed. "I want you. Or... Spike. And I know I shouldn't, I know it's wrong, that *I'm* wrong, but—"

"Were you in Heaven, too?"

That threw her off her rambling confession, the litany of unacknowledged truths she'd ignored these last couple of weeks. Things she'd hope she'd stop feeling one day, like it was that simple.

But Spike—this Spike—wasn't glaring at her anymore. His eyes had softened. He looked more like the Spike she knew.

"Yeah." She pressed her lips together. "I've put together that I—or your Buffy—died the same way here."

"Glory."

"Yeah. And my friends—"

"Right wankers, the lot of them." Spike was still a moment longer, then he sighed and edged forward. "What were they? These wishes of yours?"

She'd seen the question coming a million miles away, but didn't realize until the moment he asked how badly she did not want to tell him. The wishes seemed so stupid now, so selfish, beyond the conceit

of thinking she might be able to create a better situation for herself. More than that, she knew the answer would hurt him in some way, even if she wasn't his Buffy, and she didn't want to do that. Whatever Spike was to her here, or back in the world in which she belonged, he had been good to her. He kept proving that no matter how things changed, some things remained the same.

"My mom died," she heard herself say, as though from a great distance. "You know that."

He nodded once, tightening his jaw. "Aneurism."

"Yeah."

"The Nibblet found her when she came home."

Oh god. Buffy pressed her hand to her brow, her stomach pitching. "Dawn found her? Where was I?"

His eyebrows shot skyward. "That not the way it happened to you?"

"I found her. I came home and—" But the answer came just as quickly. She should have seen it. "I didn't live there, did I? I was—*am*—married to Angel. And we didn't live there."

"Why settle in the bloody suburbs when you got your own sodding mansion, yeah?" Spike snorted. "So I take it you aren't the little missus where you come from?"

"No. Angel lives in LA. And is still on a liquid-only diet."

He nodded, snickering. "He didn't choose you."

The words knifed her, but it was an old sort of pain and one without direction. She didn't need to know what he meant to understand what he was saying, though how *choosing* her had resulted in his sporting a pulse and becoming a version of Angel that couldn't stand to be in the same room with her, she didn't know.

"A-after Mom died, Dawn was... Well, we were all going through a lot. Long story short, I was told by her school that if her grades didn't improve and if she didn't stop skipping, I might be found unfit to be her guardian. And wouldn't you know it, being dead all summer and impersonated by the Buffybot didn't do much to move the needle."

"Sorry, the what?"

She glanced at him, frowning. "You didn't have a Buffybot made?"

"What the bleeding hell is..." But then he trailed off, his expression

growing pensive. "That bloke last year—made a robo-girl who tossed some poor blighter through a window. He make a version of you, too?"

"Yeah. One you commissioned."

Now Spike was gaping at her like that was the most ridiculous thing she could have said, which, given she had lived it, she didn't really appreciate. Though it sparked something—a possibility she hadn't considered before.

"Spike...how long have we—how long have you and the other Buffy been fooling around?"

Just as quickly, his expression shuttered. "Fooling around? That's what you call it?"

She winced. No, that wouldn't be what she called it. Maybe before she'd stepped inside the crypt, before she'd gotten an eyeful of this place that he had gone to lengths to make hers, but not now. "No," she said softly, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. "Sorry, no. I just... I didn't know. Spike—the Spike back in my world... It was just more recent, I think. I didn't find out he had feelings for me until right before my mom died."

Spike huffed, shaking his head. "Bit slow on the uptake, your Spike, is he?"

"Hey!"

"Or, more like, things went differently enough there that he didn't see it when I did. Poor bloke had to make himself a shag toy in your likeness."

It was beyond weird, hearing Spike talk about actions Spike had taken as though they belonged to someone else. Weirder still knowing that they did, however things worked between these two versions of Sunnydale. This was a Spike who had been with Buffy in one form or another for a significant enough period of time that the extremes her Spike had gone to struck him as funny.

"How long has it been for you?" she asked again. "You and...other Buffy?"

She wished she hadn't asked for the pain that flashed across his face—a pain she knew well. That dread, that damn certainty, that something precious had been lost forever.

"Long enough," he said hoarsely. "Look, pet, wager before the night

is out you'll have all your little questions answered, but this is my world, my crypt, and you're standin' there wearing *my* Slayer so we're doin' this my way. You want your supper? Gotta sing for it."

Buffy nodded, eyeing the plate of pasta he'd had all nice and prepared for her. The ravioli might be a lost cause, but she was still hungry and he hadn't trashed everything they'd gotten from the bistro. "Can that be literal supper?"

At that, his expression softened. "'Course," he said, and gestured at the plate. "Eat up."

She flashed him a smile that she hoped conveyed her gratitude and hurried forward to do just that. While the pasta had cooled considerably as they'd talked, there were still wafts of steam rising from the noodles, enough that she didn't think she needed it to be nuked before shoveling it down her throat. At this point, she wasn't above using her fingers in lieu of utensils, though Spike was apparently more dignified than that and handed her a fork the next second.

Not just any fork. One from her mother's collection.

And she had to know, whether she deserved to or not. She had to know before she said another word.

"Is she in love with you? Your Buffy?"

He didn't respond, but he didn't have to. The answer was in his eyes.

"Tell me about these wishes," he said instead. "Then we'll talk about me and Buffy."

7

AND THE PUNCHLINE IS YOU WERE NEVER ACTUALLY IN CONTROL

She ate while she talked. It was nice to have something to focus on—something other than Spike's frustratingly unreadable face—as she detailed the wish that had taken Dawn from her. That one was the easiest to talk about and she spent as much time discussing it as possible, making sure he understood the severity of the situation in her world. She also told him more about the Buffybot, about Glory and her Spike, and how he'd sacrificed everything to keep her protected. How he'd watched over her sister all summer and how he'd taken care of *her* the minute he'd realized she was alive again.

When he asked her what that had to do with the wish, she hadn't been able to say. Except that talking about her Spike made her hope that this Spike—this Spike who had kissed and stroked and whispered his love for her—would realize that memories aside, she was still Buffy. She wanted to be *Buffy* with him, not some facsimile. The warmth and concern he'd regarded her with before—she wanted that back. Even if it wasn't hers.

But she hadn't said as much. It was hard enough reconciling that thought in her own head, let alone sharing it with Spike—any version of him. So she'd gone on, keeping her gaze on her plate, admiring the way the prongs of her fork speared the noodles open and that the

cheese-to-sauce ratio was damn near perfect, and told him about the second wish. The one that had gotten Giles killed.

Only her pasta wasn't interesting enough to keep her eyes from filling, or the pain that had rocketed through her back at the Magic Box from exploding all over again. Giles was gone because of her—there was no getting around that. She had killed the man who was practically her father, and all over money.

Spike sighed and stood then, rounded the couch where she sat and made his way back to the kitchen nook. When he returned, it was with a bottle of her favorite beer. More bits of Buffy he kept at his crypt.

"That's how the paw works, pet," he said, sinking beside her again and handing her the bottle. "Gives you what you ask for but makes bloody sure you pay a price for it. Nothin' that seems easy comes free."

"Anya didn't tell me that."

"No. Sounds like she just told you it was bloody dangerous and only on-hand so it could be destroyed." He arched an eyebrow. "And since when do you need to be told the obvious, Slayer?"

"I wish you'd been there to stop me."

He released a long, shaky breath. "Yeah. Me, too."

It was unfair, how much punch he could pack into two little words. How hard they sounded, how much she felt them. Buffy pursed her lips and set her plate on the floor beside the couch to give herself something to do as she waited for the awkward to pass. Though the awkward wasn't just in what she'd said or how he'd replied, so waiting seemed a moot point after a moment. "I don't know how I talked myself into it," she said. "I'm...I'm not *dumb,* Spike. You're right. I've seen what happens when magic goes bad. But I thought I'd be stuck there forever and no one was listening to me. Anya, Giles... I tried talking to them both and it was like they forgot we live on the Hellmouth where wackiness is the status quo. The few times I got Giles to believe me, the loop would start again. And the monkey's paw was just *there,* every time I went down. After a while, it started to seem like an escape hatch."

"Buffy." When she dared to glance up, she found his eyes were softer than they had been, his expression almost fond. He looked so much like her Spike at that moment that she wanted to cry again.

"Reckon you managed as well as you could, yeah? Life for my Slayer hasn't been a bloody peach since her mates worked the mojo, either. Comin' back to this, the Nibblet in the wind, bloody Angel pissin' away the insurance money, her chums figurin' she was in Hell for some barmy reason. Adds up, doesn't it? Was why the Slayer and me had the chat we did. Knew it'd be a temptation for her."

That made her feel marginally better—not so much what he'd told her but that he'd bothered to tell her anything. That he cared enough to try.

Or maybe she was just fooling herself.

"The last wish involved Angel," she said, looking down again. "He found out I was back from the dead and he needed to see me. And I haven't felt anything. The only times I do are when I'm with you." Once the words were out, she feared she'd said too much. That he'd read too much into it, ridiculous as it was. This version of Spike who was in a relationship with a version of her, possibly thinking that she might feel something for him when Buffy knew damn well that she couldn't. This her, anyway. The present and accounted for Buffy Summers. "It's nothing you do... It's more that you just let me be not okay. I don't have to pretend. I can be sad or angry or nothing at all and you let me do that without expecting me to perk up and be Little Miss Sunnydale about being alive again. I tell you what I'm thinking and you just accept it and god, I need that. I thought... I thought maybe I'd have that with Angel too. But when we met, it was just...bad. He was the love of my life and I could hardly stand to be in the same room."

Spike snickered and tossed back a mouthful of whatever he was drinking. "Love of your life, eh? Seen the wanker recently?"

"That's not Angel."

"No? How you figure?"

"Because I know him. We might not be close anymore but I *know* him." Buffy cracked open the beer he'd brought her. "Whoever that Angel is...that's the paw's doing. The way my wish killed Giles, it made Angel...*that*."

Spike brought up his hands as though in surrender, though he was still smirking, which made her want to punch him.

"So that's it," she said, pushing on before she did something she regretted. "Those were the wishes. Dawn, money, Angel. And here I am." Buffy sighed and leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "In a world where my sister is gone, Giles is dead, I'm married to a version of Angel that can't stand the sight of me, and apparently I'm in love with my former mortal enemy."

"No need to sound so excited on my account." Spike threw back another drink. "I might blush."

Buffy rolled her eyes and turned her head to him. "You don't seem as mad as you were before."

"'Bout what?"

"Me being...not your Buffy."

He considered this, though it seemed that he was making a concerted effort to not look at her. "Nah," he replied at length, eyeing the bottom of his glass. "Could rip your spine out, but I got it figured. You wished your way here—you can wish your way back."

The thought had her perking up. "You think so? But what will the price be, if I use it again?"

"Not talkin' about usin' the bloody paw. More than one way to make a wish." He grunted though. "Not too hot on magic of any sort, truth be told, but I know one thing for certain—the Buffy who belongs here, the one who loves me, I'm gettin' her back. One way or another. Best way to do that is to get you back too, yeah? We find a way to do that."

She swallowed, taking in the determined set of his jaw, the steel in his eyes. A long time ago, Angel had told her that once Spike focused on something, nothing stood in his way. In the years since she'd known him, he'd set out to prove that wasn't just talk. Everything she'd seen, what he'd done to protect her and Dawn, his dedication to her memory that had kept him true to his promise—all of it spoke of someone who never gave up. When something mattered to him, it really mattered.

And somehow, he'd fallen in love with her. Twice. Though Buffy wasn't sure how this wish-world logic worked—if this Spike and his Buffy had even existed before yesterday, or if she'd created them simply by voicing the right words while holding the right artifact. Dawn had

been sent to her with fourteen years of memories preprogrammed, but that didn't change that she was barely a year old.

Had she created a new reality or had the paw simply sent her to a reality that fit her criteria? If the latter, did that mean she *wasn't* responsible for Giles's death? That it had happened, would have happened, regardless of whether she'd been a weak, desperate idiot?

The thought eased the weight that had set up shop on her chest, but only a little. There likely was no way to know for sure.

But there were things she could know—things she probably needed to know, if she had any hope of navigating this world until they found a way to set things right. Things about her relationship with Spike, how it was that, in both worlds, he seemed willing to do anything for her. How she could have fallen in love with him when the concept of *love* seemed so distant to her now.

So she shoved her thoughts aside and went for it. Hell, there was nothing left to lose by asking.

"How long have you and I been...a thing here?"

The corner of his mouth twitched. "*A thing*. Bit of a step up from *foolin' around*, I suppose."

"I'm sorry about that."

He lifted a shoulder as if to say it didn't matter either way, but she could tell it did. Even if she wasn't his Buffy, he wanted her to acknowledge that what they had was real, *important*, because that's what it was to him.

"Been in love with her since the bloody start, if I'm bein' honest. From the second I saw you—*her*—" He broke off, shaking his head and barking a short, self-effacing laugh. "Bollocks, this twin business is a right trip."

"Not a twin."

"No, you're not. You're her. You're Buffy." Now he looked up, and more of that pain she'd seen earlier flashed across his face. "Suppose that means I love you, too, which is buggering with my head 'cause I've always been a one-woman fella and havin' you here, bein' her but not her... Fuck."

Her throat tightened. "Again with the sorry."

"Wager I'm makin' it more complicated than it is, yeah?"

"I'm not sure this can be anything but complicated." She thought for a moment. "But, as far as it being who is who, you're still you. My friends are still...well, my friends. And I want to find Dawn, no matter if she's not *my* Dawn. Because she's still my sister."

"Yeah. Funny how everyone in your life's the same except Angel, innit?" Now he was smirking like he had her cornered. "Sure your glasses aren't just a mite rosy where you come from, Slayer?"

Yeah, he was definitely Spike. No one else could test her patience the way he did. "Just answer the question," she said, terse. "You seem to be avoiding it."

"Not avoidin' it. Just not sure how much you're really keen to hear, since you're still hung up on the Great Forehead."

"I'm not hung up on him."

"Made a wish to turn him into your steady fella, didn't you?"

"It wasn't even about..." Buffy blew out a breath, shook her head. Arguing this seemed a wasted effort, given the circumstances, but the wish had been less about wanting Angel and more about wanting the connection they had once shared. Thinking that perhaps if he'd never left, if they had remained in each other's lives, his presence would have been more of a comfort.

Though sitting here, Buffy wondered if maybe it had been more about Spike—her own sense of misgiving, of *wrong*, that came with wanting him, seeking him out. After all, if she could feel that way about anyone, it *should* be Angel. But it wasn't. Not in her world and definitely not in this one. This world where Buffy had ostensibly gotten everything she'd ever wanted yet still found herself seeking out the company of the undead. Apparently in love with Spike—soulless, evil Spike.

"That's the reason you don't want to tell me? You think hearing what happened will make me see that the Angel I'm married to here is the same Angel back in my world and that will...what?"

Spike didn't respond at first, but he also didn't look away, and what she saw in his eyes made her breath catch and her chest tighten. There was so much there—it was unfair how much there was. Unfair how much he could say without breathing a word.

"Watchin' you lose your head over that wanker was bloody unbearable the first time around," he told her at last. "Just not too eager to go through that again."

Buffy worked her throat, her heart pounding now at a hard, unforgiving rhythm. It still seemed ridiculous, though. Insane. The Angel who had glared at her that morning couldn't be the same Angel she kept alive in her memory—the ghost that had shadowed her relationship with Riley, unacknowledged until the end. She might not be sure what she felt for him anymore—it didn't feel like love, or at least not the love she remembered—but the feeling itself had been such a huge part of her for so long now, she wasn't sure what she was without it. That *being* without it was in part responsible for the decision she'd made at the shop.

But she also knew she couldn't *not* know what had happened here. How the world had turned into this. See if she could identify the steps the other Buffy had taken, where the story had veered off course, where the anomalies had been born. Especially if she were to navigate the world that the other Buffy's choices had resulted in—she needed to know how she'd gotten there.

"I can handle it," she said.

Spike gave her another smile, the sort that said he knew her better than that, but didn't argue. "All right, Slayer. Like I said, been since the start for me. Was a bloody goner the first time I saw you move. Took a while to figure it, though, and Dru knew too. Bloody well before I did. That's why the bitch left me in the first place."

"Dru left you because of me?"

Amazingly, he chuckled. Laughter was not something Buffy would have ever thought he would associate with that period of his life. "Always surprisin' people, Dru. Just because she's outta her bloody mind doesn't mean she doesn't see clearly. Certainly had my number."

She deflated, feeling a little winded. She had never gotten around to asking Spike anything about his relationship with Drusilla. Hell, from what she'd heard, Dru had started fooling around with other demons because she was disappointed that Spike hadn't let the world get sucked into Hell. Never had *feelings* come into the mix. The infidelity had always been on her end.

That she had broken it off with him because he'd been in love with another woman had never once been a consideration.

"Mighta dusted not knowing I loved you if it hadn't been for those government boys," Spike continued. "After the chip, I couldn't just leave when my plans went to hell. Had a reason to stick around—needed them to fix me."

"The Initiative." So all things secret government-ops had happened here, too. Buffy didn't know how she felt about that. The more things that were different, the easier it was to reconcile as completely separate from the world she'd left behind. The idea that this might have been her future at any point, but for a few different turns, had her stomach in knots.

But that had to be wrong—it *had* to be.

"Right," Spike said, apparently nonplussed that so much of their history was shared, even across realities. "Came to you right around Thanksgiving—"

"This is stuff I know."

"Oh ho?" He favored her with an appraising look. "Well, love, like I said, that was it for me. I stayed, and I was forced to watch you rather than fight. Couldn't tell myself pretty little lies anymore. Took you a bit longer. Think you had to go through everythin' you did before you saw your knight's armor didn't shine as much as he'd fooled you into thinking."

"But..." God, this still didn't make sense. "How? How in the world is Angel human? How does someone go from being a vampire to—*ta-da*—with the pulse and the breathing and... If this was possible, why did he leave in the first place?" She paused. "Wait, did he *not* leave? Did something happen and he decided to stay?"

"Somethin' happened." He huffed and shook his head. "You say I came to you over your Yank holiday back in your world, too, after the government sods had wired me up?"

"Yeah..."

"And was your wanker of an ex here doin' some cloak and dagger rot at the same time?" When she nodded, he perked his eyebrows. "You get your knickers in a twist and tail him back to LA in your world, hopin' to get your belly rubbed?"

The way he phrased that again made her want to pop him in the nose. He must have known, for he laughed and shook his head.

"Hard to believe you're not her," he muttered almost fondly. "Way you're eyeballin' me now..."

"I went to LA to see my dad. Angel just—"

"—happened to be a bloody pit stop. Yeah, love, we've had this chat a time or two. Got there so you could feed him a piece of your mind or what all. Tell him that he couldn't come skulkin' around since he'd been the one to up and leave you high and dry." Spike swished what remained of his drink from one side of the glass to the next, following the liquid with his eyes. "Don't suppose your chat was interrupted, was it? Anyone come crashin' through the window?"

Buffy frowned. The words had her chest doing funny things. "Yeah," she said. "Actually, I think... Yeah. But Angel killed it."

"Wagered that had to be it, if he's still a vamp where you come from."

"What are you talking about?"

"Slayer, the beastie that crashed your party was called a Mohra demon."

"Okay?"

"The Mohra came in, mixed his blood with your beau's, and suddenly Angel had himself a heartbeat." Spike had looked up again and fixed her with a look that shook her to the bone. "Way you tell it, anyway. Had a blissful reunion shag and were makin' plans on livin' merrily ever after till the sod got cold feet."

"No," Buffy said shortly. No, that was wrong. None of that had happened. The demon had come through the window and Angel had killed it. It had been a random but ultimately forgettable part of the trip—a trip that had been painful in every respect. Never mind the hell that was visiting Angel, her father had been too busy, too important, to see her, which had hurt even if he'd been nothing but a convenient excuse. "That didn't happen."

"Right." Spike held her gaze for a moment before looking down again with a sigh. "That'd be where the cold feet come in. Angel got himself all bruised tryin' fight the good fight along with you and reckoned maybe he oughta go back to brooding in the dark to keep you

from gettin' yourself killed. Talked with some higher-ups about turnin' back the day, makin' it so you didn't remember a lick of what might have been, and was all set to go through with it till you caught wise and changed his mind. Not sure how. You've never been too giving with these details. I always figured you just flashed your tits and reminded him that he'd be back in the chastity belt."

The urge to strike him shot through her once more, this time almost impossible to ignore. "That is so—"

"Either way, that was the end of it. All I know is you came back from LA all rosy-cheeked and announcin' that somethin' wonderful had happened." At this, he rolled his eyes and snickered. "Prince Angel had some stuff to sort out, 'course. Closin' up shop, helpin' those poor gits who'd signed on with him find new work and all. And you had to break it to that piece of cornbread you were toyin' with that you and your ex had worked things out. Got a front-row seat for most of it, bein' chained up at your watcher's flat. Once you spread the joyous news, I told you right off to let me go—didn't want a wretched thing to do with Angel. Bastard made my life hell enough before I couldn't take a swipe at him and I wasn't gonna sit around and wait for him to come get his jollies by kickin' me around when I couldn't bloody well kick back."

Buffy wanted to argue the point, say that Angel would never punch someone that couldn't defend themselves, but the words wouldn't come. Not necessarily because she didn't believe them, but because it brought to mind how many times *she* had done just that. Done it without thought, without hesitation, without regret or doubt. Sometimes even when she knew he'd given her good information, punching him just felt like the natural way to conclude their interaction, lest he think she might be going soft on him.

"But you were bein' a stubborn bitch about it, so I had to make a run for it on my own," Spike went on. "Lucky me, Rupert's eyesight started going wonky 'cause of a spell your little chum had cast, gave me an opening. 'Course that meant you had to hunt me down, and Red didn't take kindly to it, seein' as she was in crisis herself and a bit sour that things were turnin' up aces for you after the wolf had run out on her."

This much sounded familiar, at least. "That was the Will Be Done spell. The one where we ended up engaged."

"Oh, you too, eh? Fuck, what was a brilliant night."

"Brilliant? Must have been different on this side of things."

"How you figure?"

"Because it ended with both of us gagging at having been making out all night."

"Did it now?"

"Yes." This she said with a bit of an edge. What the hell was he trying to prove?

His smirk broadened. "You say the Spike on your side's in love with you?"

"He wasn't then."

Spike shook his head, rumbling another laugh. "Tell you how I remember it, yeah? Had her on me, straddling me, world going to hell around us and neither of us caring a lick. Then somethin' snaps in my head and I remember. She does too. Sorry fool that I am, I think for a mo' that she might just shrug and go on snogging me. Could tell how hot she was for it, how much she wanted it. But then she makes this face and pitches a fit over how sodding disgusting I am and I pitch one right back, 'cause who the hell does she think she is?" He met her eyes again, greeting whatever he saw there with more laughter. "So what happened for you, love? Spell ends, you're you again, and you're wigglin' on your sworn enemy's lap. You swoon and let me get a hand down your knickers or shove off and make like I was somethin' you might find under your boot? Reckon if this other Spike's at all like yours truly, he would've kept on snogging you all bloody night. But a man's got his pride, doesn't he? Can't let on when he knows the bird doesn't fancy him back."

That couldn't be right. While her memory was imperfect and her history with Spike patchy at best, she definitely recalled the horror being mutual. He'd gaped at her and shoved, fought to his feet and swiped at his mouth as though something foul had climbed inside. Spike was many things but a decent actor wasn't one of them. She remembered because his revulsion had hurt, stupid as it was, insane as it was. She'd just started gaining her confidence back where men were

concerned, thanks to Parker—and Angel, come to think of it—and Spike had to make like kissing her had been a punishment or something.

This Spike's surety had her questioning everything she thought she knew. She didn't like it.

"Anyway," he continued when she failed to comment, "Angel swooped right on in after. Went all Neanderthal 'bout the spell business, tried to run me outta town, but I wasn't goin' anywhere till those soldier boys put my head back right. You two decided to tie the knot right quick and I didn't see much of you after that until the other bird came outta her coma."

Buffy's heart began thundering once more, though she didn't know why. She knew what had happened—or had a good enough idea, based on last time. That didn't explain the way her stomach twisted when Spike started speaking again.

The first few details were similar enough—those Spike knew anyway. Apparently, this world's Buffy hadn't told him much about what happened pre-body swap, so he left out the confrontation on campus and how Faith had gone after her mother and sister. But he didn't have to say as much; Buffy saw it just the same. The way Faith would have sneered that now that Buffy was the little missus—never mind a college student—she didn't have time for pesky accessories like a family. After all, everything had turned out just right for her, hadn't it? Saved the day just as promised and she'd gotten the guy in the end, too. Faith would have seized upon that just as sure as she had in her time. So when Spike got to the part about the doodad that performed the body switcharoo, Buffy just nodded.

"She slept with Angel, didn't she? When she was in my body."

Spike paused, favored her with a concerned look, as though debating how much he should share. But he nodded after a moment, sucking in his cheeks. "Yeah. Among other things." He glanced down. "Also spoke a piece to me that twisted my head around. At first, thought you were just bein' a bitch as always—first time you'd deigned to look at me since Will's spell, and all. Then I wagered the little witch had done more dabblin', because there was no sodding way Buffy bloody Summers would offer to polish my knob when she was married

to *Angel*. Not sure what happened after, exactly, 'cept you got your skin back and your loving husband made some remark about how the shagging had never been so brilliant before he caught wise that you hadn't been behind the wheel. Think you mighta forgiven him for that if I hadn't blabbed that Faith hadn't gotten in my trousers, despite her best bloody efforts. Also didn't help that Peaches put himself between you and her, sayin' she oughta have a chance at turnin' it all around, or whatever. Seemed to have a soft spot for the bitch."

He paused again, and she felt the weight of his stare—felt because she couldn't meet it just now, too lost in thoughts she'd rather not be having. Old thoughts, those she'd convinced herself she'd left in the past. Only they weren't entirely the same, either, as the ones she'd once entertained. Close but no cigar. She remembered the way her gut had twisted when she'd seen Faith and Angel entwined during his act as his soulless half. They'd looked good together, natural, and there had been plenty of hunger on both sides—hunger she'd never managed to fully believe was entirely performance-driven on Angel's part.

Then when she'd followed Faith to Los Angeles, shown up at Angel Investigations to *tip him off* and found them with their arms around each other—fresh off of having just forgiven Riley for not having known who he was fucking... That had been a kick to the gut. After all, Riley hadn't known the whole story, couldn't appreciate just how much knowing they had bumped uglies hurt. But that Angel could wrap himself around Faith after everything she'd done—after nearly killing him with a poisoned arrow, after Buffy herself had nearly died to save him—that had hurt more than all of it. More than Riley and more than Faith going after her family. She'd felt betrayed on levels she didn't know she had.

"That was the start," Spike said after a moment, jarring her out of her thoughts. "Not of us, but I wager it's always there for her. Knowin' the bloke who was supposed to love her more than anythin' could look into her eyes and not realize the bird lookin' back wasn't her." A beat, and when he spoke again, his voice shook. "Fuck, it's gonna be a bloody wonder if she doesn't stake me when things are turned right again. I'll deserve it."

"What?"

"Shoulda known, yeah? Always thought I would." He sighed, long and pained, and leaned forward, elbows braced on his knees and face falling into his waiting hands. "Promised her and myself I'd never hurt her like that."

She wanted to ask what he was talking about but she knew. What's more, he knew she knew. They were in sync like that—always had been, it seemed. "It's not the same, you and me."

He snorted. "Don't try to make me feel better."

"I'm not. It's the truth."

"Yeah? And what the bloody hell would you know?"

"I'm *Buffy*, aren't I? I know how I think."

"And knowin' what you know, how much it gutted you the first time, you'd forgive the man who loves you—the man you trust not to hurt you—for looking into your eyes and not realizin' what he was seeing?"

"Spike, Faith swapped bodies with me too. And she slept with my boyfriend. Not Angel, but a guy I'd just gotten serious about. And I forgave him." She waited for him to look at her, undoubtedly to tell her it wasn't the same—and it wasn't; she knew that—but she needed him to look at her anyway. "And it's still me. I'm still Buffy."

He didn't reply. Just sat beside her with his brows drawn, his mouth pulled into a frown, a bunch of stuff going on behind his eyes that made her skin tingle. A bunch of stuff that had her feeling things.

When Riley had slept with Faith, it had been a big blow—one made bigger by the fact that everyone seemed to think she'd taken a perfectly nice molehill and made a mountain out of it. Not true infidelity, after all, because how in the world could Riley have known the person wearing his girlfriend's face was someone other than his girlfriend? Being upset about that was just silly. He'd been a victim as much as she had, after all. There was no way he'd have gotten groiny with Faith under any other circumstance.

But Buffy had been there too. She'd looked into a demon's face and managed to find her watcher when no one else had. Maybe that had screwed with her expectations. Maybe she'd thought everyone had the ability to just *know*.

Here Spike felt guilty for unknowingly cheating on his Buffy with a

different Buffy. Not even another woman, just another version of the same woman, yet still believing that he deserved whatever anger his Buffy would lob at him. And yeah, maybe he was right. Buffy couldn't say that it wouldn't bother her, knowing that someone she loved and trusted had been with someone else, even in the way she and Spike had been together—quick and fumbling and in the dark with few words exchanged. But she also knew herself well enough to know she would understand.

Moreover, she would forgive. Especially in seeing how much Spike regretted it—not just the act itself but what it represented. That knowing someone, really knowing them, meant recognizing them beyond the surface. It meant knowing every part.

Something twisted in her chest, making all of her ache. Riley hadn't gotten that, and apparently, Angel hadn't either.

"When did things with us start?" Buffy asked before clearing her throat.

Spike inhaled deeply. "Last year," he said after a beat. "Dunno what happened, really. Just she reached a point where she realized she was miserable."

"And Miserable Buffy becomes Cheater Buffy how?"

He snorted again, rolled his eyes. "Let's say you beg a bloke to turn human for you. Give everythin' up and come play house for sixty, seventy years or some such. Make it clear he's your sun and moon and stars, your whole bloody world. Then comes the day when you realize that might not be right after all. How do you reckon you'd explain to him that you had it wrong and he gave up bein' someone for nothin'?"

The parts of her that had started to soften immediately hardened again. Of course Spike would see it that way. "Angel didn't want to be a vampire, though."

"Yeah, pet, he did."

"That's—"

"Slayer, he was someone as a vampire. Evil or not, he had his purpose, didn't he? Had power and strength and more. Why do you reckon he was as bad as he was? Wanker wanted to be feared—wanted to be *remembered*. Worked hard at it 'cause his dear ole dad told him he was a useless waste of space that his mum oughta have snuffed out the

second he crowned." Spike huffed as though this were funny and sat back, slumping against the couch. "You had it in your head that a soul changes who you are at the core—guess you still do, where you come from. Sorry to say, sweets, that's a load of bunk. All that soul did was flip the script. Instead of bein' the Big Bad, he could fancy himself quite the tragic little hero. Amounted to the same thing in the end—bein' somethin' more than he was when he was alive. Suddenly he's human again and not important anymore. You talked him outta bein' someone so he could be a kept man. What's life for him now? Waitin' by the door? Takin' up knitting?"

Her face had gone hot, her temples pounding. She heard what Spike was saying—worse, she understood it, and she didn't want to. The thought that it could be so superficial, what had happened between her and Angel, hit her in a place she hadn't been hit before.

"Xander's human and he—"

But Spike gave her a look and she stopped talking. Xander was human and he'd never been anything but. He'd never had to adjust to being less powerful than he was right now—he'd only had forward.

"Got worse when your mum got sick," Spike continued a moment later. "Angel mighta been human but he was still your world, far as he was concerned. Then suddenly he wasn't anymore."

Again, she swelled with the need to argue. That had been Riley's problem, among other things. Not Angel's. Never Angel's. And she opened her mouth to tell him just that, but then her mind caught up with her and she closed it again.

Angel *had* been her world. Never once had that not been true in the time they'd spent together—her world had been simpler then, less layered, more childlike and innocent, even in the times that had nearly crushed her. What had happened afterward—Dawn, Mom, the weight and acceptance of what it meant to be the Slayer—had transformed her world into something else. Something less binary and more significant than who she was dating, which had pretty much defined life as she'd known it up until that point.

How much had Angel's being a vampire informed their relationship in the first place? There had been the thrill, in the beginning, of knowing she was doing something dangerous *with* someone dangerous,

all hormones and stolen kisses and that the world seemed set against them. Then after he'd come back, the thrill had been in the forbidden. Knowing she shouldn't but being pulled toward him anyway, and once they'd done the tug-of-war over whether they were friends or more than friends or downright exes, their relationship had seemed to center on the fact that they shouldn't be in one.

Take away the fangs, the thing that made their being together impossible, and what was left?

As though he were reading her mind, Spike nodded and said, "Thing you gotta understand, Slayer, is Angelus was always front and center with his women. He was never a bloody set piece or a caretaker. All or nothin'. If it wasn't about him, he wasn't interested." He met her gaze again, his mouth twitching at whatever he saw on her face. "Look, you asked, I'm tellin'. Like I said, don't know the full of it. Just what I reckon happened, along with what you—*she*—told me."

"She talk about Angel a lot?" The question came out harsher than she intended. Or maybe *just* how she intended. It felt better, being angry at Spike. More natural. Familiar and right, in a world where nothing else was.

"Well, yeah." Spike shifted and drew a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. "Think it was easy for her, runnin' around on him? Talking's how it started between us. She wanted to know why I'd known somethin' was off when Faith was prancin' around in her skin and her own sodding husband hadn't. Didn't ask nicely, of course, and thrashed me around when she didn't like the answer."

Buffy snickered in spite of herself. "I bet you just hated that."

"Catchin' on, aren't you?" He flashed an unrepentant grin as he drew one of the cigarettes between his fingers. "Was slow goin'. Talking became confiding, started meetin' up for patrols and the like. Never forget the time I got her to admit we were friends. You meet Demon Girl's ex in your world?"

"The troll with the hammer?"

"That's the one. Buffy took off after he tore up the Bronze, left me to the wounded." His smile softened and his eyes grew distant. "Told me before she left that bein' one of the Slayer's mates doesn't come with fringe benefits and if she heard tale of me flashin' some fang to

take a nibble here or there, she'd come at me with a stake. If I hadn't already been lost for her, that's what woulda done me in." Spike was still for a moment, then shifted and produced a lighter. "Not too long after that was when it happened. She snogged me. We were arguin' about somethin'—bugger if I remember what—and then she was kissin' my lips off and we..."

He breathed out, the sound shaky, and his eyes dark the way they had been last night when he'd been inside of her. Those few blissful minutes when the panic had receded and her world had leveled and she'd felt something other than despair.

Buffy breathed out too, slow, trying to chase the images away. *Don't go there. You can't go there.*

"Spent the first few weeks hatin' me and herself, 'course," Spike went on, voice now somewhat strained. "Tellin' me it was over and then showin' up durin' one of her nightly jaunts to ride me blind. Was sweet bloody torture, havin' her, holdin' her, knowin' she felt... She never told me what she felt, but a man knows. There was a reason she couldn't stay away. Why she only laughed when she was with me. Why she felt so..." Some of the light faded from his eyes. "Begged her to leave the sod but she felt responsible."

"Responsible?" The word tasted bitter, but she understood almost at once, that weight settling on her shoulders as though it truly had been her decisions that had put it there. Angel. Begging him to maintain his humanity, to hold onto her, to choose her the way she had chosen him over and over again.

Spike knew this, of course, and didn't bother explaining what *responsible* meant. "After Joyce died, the Slayer swore me off. Said it was all a mistake and she needed to recommit to her marriage and what all, though she didn't want to. Spent the entire time sobbing her heart out, tellin' me it was for the best and a load of rubbish about the vow she'd made."

"Fidelity is rubbish?"

"Not what I said, Slayer."

"But—"

"Suppose you'd rather waste away?" he fired back. "Can't leave the berk even if you stopped lovin' him because you think he's your

responsibility, and he won't leave you 'cause where the bloody hell else is he gonna go? She didn't know him when she married him, got herself trapped in somethin' she couldn't get out of." A beat, then he released a breath, seeming to calm when she didn't immediately launch in with something else. "Thought that was the end, me and her. Miserable as it made me. Wouldn't leave, though, even though she said I should—for me, not for her. She said she didn't want me to go but wasn't selfish enough to ask me to stay. Thought it'd be easier for me to move on if I wasn't here. Just so happens I'm not the sort who takes the easy way out."

That Buffy knew intimately.

"And that mighta been it if Glory hadn't decided I was Key-shaped and tried to bust me open."

"Glory?" Her heart thudded. "That happened to you too?"

"What? You thought that was just your fella?" Spike shook his head as though offended and at last lit up. "Her hobbits had seen me and the Slayer nice and cozy enough to think I might be somethin' special so they dragged me to the bitch, who tortured the stuffin' outta me until I managed to smart off just right so she kicked me free. Then Buffy came in like a bloody Valkyrie and did the rest. Had the witches work some mojo on the crypt." He fell quiet for a moment, studying the smoke pluming off his cigarette. "Afterward, she came to take care of me, fix me up. See if Glory had gotten anythin' outta me, too, though she wouldn't admit it. That was the first time I told her I loved her—mighta yelled it, actually, bloody brassed as I was. Couldn't believe she'd think I'd do that to her. Not after everythin' we'd..."

Buffy breathed out in a rush, feeling gut-punched. "I'm sorry," she said, not knowing what she was apologizing for or why, just that it seemed to be the right thing to say.

"Nothin' to be sorry for, pet," he said, somehow grinning again. "Wager she just needed a remindin'. Either way, the whole bloody stint with the hell-bitch brought the Slayer back to me, so can't complain too much. Wasn't until the end, before she jumped, that she told me she loved me too. The last thing she told me was that she loved me." He blinked once, twice, and even though it was dark, she saw the telling shine, the tears he couldn't help but shed. "Then she was gone

and...not even cold in the ground before sodding Angel ships the Nibblet off to your bloody useless father and puts your mum's house up for sale."

At that, Buffy jerked forward, her heart suddenly jackrabbitting. "He what?"

Spike frowned. "Yeah. Cashed in the insurance money and skipped town."

"What insurance money?"

"He took out a policy on you, love." The frown softened and something that looked close to pity filled his eyes, making her already-roiling stomach grow even tighter. "The lot of us didn't know until he'd gone."

Again, the world around her spun, her mind on overload and threatening to rebel. She understood the words in the academic sense, knew what they meant, but fixing them to Angel was another matter. Angel had taken out an insurance policy on her. Gambled, prepared for a payout in the event of her death.

It's normal, said the voice of her inner teenager; the one who had been arguing Angel's virtues since he'd first stepped out of the shadows. *Married people get insurance policies on each other all the time.*

That was perfectly true, she knew. Didn't explain why the thought left her feeling so hollow.

"Think Anya said somethin' about it making sense, you havin' such a short life and likely to die bloody," Spike said, as though reading her mind. "Dunno what happened much after that, truth be told. Didn't stick around myself, either."

"You didn't?"

"'Course not. Had a promise to keep."

Buffy's mind spun faster, but she didn't have to look hard. She knew. "Dawn."

"Bloody right."

"You followed her."

"Told you I'd take care of her and I meant it." But his jaw hardened and the gleam in his eyes fell flat. "Followed her and took off with her half a dozen times before your git of a father got the lawyers involved."

"Lawyers?"

"Firm outta LA called Wolfram and Hart. Deals in powerful, black arts mojo. Darkest stuff you'll ever touch—they got their hand in everythin'. Daddy Dearest got tired of Dawn runnin' off with a vamp, so he struck a deal and I lost her. Never sussed out how he managed to track us down each time, but he did. Imagine the lawyers had somethin' to do with that too." Spike released a low, slow breath, plucked the cigarette from between his lips and shook as he dragged his free hand down his face. "She told me, that last time I had her, that he was aimin' to ship her off to a boarding school or summat. Somethin' else the lawyers worked up, no bloody doubt. But god, I tried. When she disappeared, I stormed right into ole Hank's office to give him a full thrashin', chip or no, but he'd had some voodoo worked on him too. Made it so I couldn't touch him without bein' launched halfway across the bloody room. Woulda found a way, though, Slayer. Better bloody believe it. If it knocked me outta my skin, I woulda found a way."

The words were heavy with intent, but she didn't need convincing. Buffy had known for a while now that there wasn't anything Spike wouldn't do for her. She'd known that ever since Glory—it was why she'd trusted him with Dawn in the first place. Why learning that he had fought alongside her friends all summer, even after she was gone, hadn't been all that surprising. Why it had meant something, and why the feelings she had for him had shifted even further into that murky gray area. *Shouldn't* and *wrong* becoming *want* and *why*, throwing the already-chaotic state of her thoughts into further distress.

"I'm guessing you heard about the resurrection," Buffy said a moment later. "Came back then?"

Spike shook his head, still not looking at her. "Came back before that. Needed to get off their radar for a bit, let them think they'd won. Only when I got here, the bloody town was overrun. Seemed the wrong crew had finally heard the Slayer had kicked it and aimed to tear the place up. Couldn't find your mates so I went to see you—your grave, that is." He worked his throat, the sound awful against the silence. "Got there in time to see you burst outta the ground. If I had a heartbeat, that's what woulda done me in. Keepin' on Dawn, tryin' to do right by her, kept me busy. Gave me something to focus on, distract myself from the fact that you were dead. Once I lost her it was like

losin' you all over again. All I'd wanted for so long was you and you were there. Thought I'd finally gone full nutter till you looked at me. Then..."

The air fell quiet—much too quiet for Spike, his gaze distant as though he were watching it all again.

"Then?" she prodded.

He gave his head a shake. "Then I saw your eyes—her eyes—and it snapped. Knew it was real, that you wouldn't look that bloody lost if it were in my head. So I grabbed you and brought you here. Patched you up, talked to you... Best and worst night of my life, that was. Finally, you just...came home. Somethin' went off and you saw me."

The way he talked, she *could* see it. Here, in this place, Spike babbling incessantly to a stone-faced Buffy who wore the dress she'd been buried in, her hair ragged and wild. That sense of emptiness, vacancy, that had dogged her terribly in the first few days—that she'd been trying to outrun ever since—filling her whole. But no trip through town, no horrifying visual of a robot in her likeness being ripped apart, no run up the tower to the place where her purpose had never been clearer, all of her at peace and full of love.

She could see the moment when it hit, too. When this world's Buffy realized she wasn't in Hell, but with someone who loved her. More than that—someone who understood, who could bear the weight of her despair when it came crashing down. Losing it hadn't been an option with Dawn—even spaced out as she'd been, she'd known that. Felt it, that need to keep her shielded, protected, even from herself.

Buffy didn't realize she was crying until a tear splashed against her hand. It was insane—irrational, even, given what she knew—but a hot, raw jolt of jealousy zapped through her all the same. Someone should have been there for her, too. She shouldn't have had to wander through town, shocked and terrified, wondering what she'd done to be ejected from the paradise that had become her home.

Spike was still talking, telling her about the days that had followed. How Angel had returned once word had reached him, poorer for having pissed away the bulk of the insurance money doing god-knows-what. He'd taken the house off the market, snarling about it all the while, and Buffy had moved back home. Just like that.

"We were both hopin' Angel'd just stay gone," Spike said. "Couldn't be that lucky, though. Once he heard you were alive he came crashin' in. Bloody begged you *again* to leave him but you wouldn't, of course. Too much goin' on for you—wrong of me to ask when I did. I just wanted you with me. Always."

So he'd made a place for her here—made his crypt her true home, the one where she could be herself. Either Angel didn't notice or didn't care that Buffy was gone more days than she was with him. He spent his time sulking at home, wasting away in front of the television when he wasn't sneaking off to get in a game of poker with the only people in town who could stand him. There had been a fight, a big one, when Buffy realized what had happened with Dawn. Spike thought that might be it—that once they found her, Buffy might have been moved to kick Angel to the curb, thanks for nothing.

But then the plane had come down, the one with Giles aboard, and everything changed again. That was how they'd found that Buffy had been left everything. The shop, the contents of the Watcher's bank account—which had been considerable, thanks to both family money and his own savings. While the money in the bank had been made more or less immediately available due to the way the accounts were set up—and the fact that Angel had never removed Buffy's name from their joint checking account—matters involving the shop weren't nearly as tidy.

"Why?" Buffy asked.

"Dunno if I can explain it properly," Spike muttered, tearing a hand through his hair. "All this makes bugger all sense to me. The shop went to you—just you, unlike the dosh since Angel's name is tacked onto your financials and the like. Trouble is, your princely husband had you declared legally dead to collect on the insurance."

"And dead people can't own property," she muttered. But they could have bank accounts, apparently, or a husband who hadn't bothered to inform the bank that the other account signatory had kicked the bucket. "Then how do I have a key to the place? And how can Anya be mad at me for not selling it if it's not mine to sell?"

"Dunno that Demon Girl knows how this works any better than I do," Spike replied, snuffing out the last of his cigarette on the arm of

the couch. Buffy wanted to protest—it was a nice couch—but held her tongue. "Bugger, didn't know, myself, until recently. Last week, this lawyer git from Wolfram and Hart shows up on your doorstep."

"The law firm that helped my dad hide Dawn?"

"Very same. This bloke... Can't remember what you called him—right nancy name, whatever it was. He tells you that they can help you come back from the dead a damn sight faster if you're willin' to do a song and dance for them."

Well, that was certainly nervy. Buffy clenched her jaw, charged with renewed anger, but anger that had a point—a direction, and one that wasn't aimed at herself, which was a refreshing change of pace. "I'm guessing I responded with a thorough ass-kicking."

"Wager you would've if the ponce hadn't talked fast." He offered a flat smile. "Turns out the bloody lawyers just want one thing. Somethin' they think Rupert had shipped to the store before he kicked it."

The rest of the pieces fell into place. "The monkey's paw."

"Kewpie doll for the little lady. Got it in one." That awful, flat grin was back. "You fork the bloody thing over and Buffy Summers lives again. Don't and they'll pull every string they have their mitts on to keep you dead on paper."

"I'm still not seeing why I didn't answer with an ass-kicking."

"More than the shop on the line, pet," Spike replied, his voice soft.

And she understood almost immediately—clarity hitting her like a lightning bolt.

"Dawn."

"Yeah. Can't be her guardian if you're dead. Nancy lawyer says if you play nice, give them what they want, they'll bloody guarantee she comes home."

Buffy sat back hard enough that the air was forced out of her lungs. Her temples throbbed and her chest hurt. Hell, all of her hurt. She'd wanted answers. Now that she had them, she thought she might suffocate. Open her mouth and choke on the dirt from the grave she never should have clawed her way out of.

She had been trapped before—gasping for air she didn't want to breathe, forcing herself to survive each moment on the absent hope that life would suddenly be worth living again. That life, with its debt

and heartache and loneliness, had been slowly poisoning her, taking every good thing she'd thought or experienced in Heaven. She'd told Spike that living there was Hell and she'd been right, only she hadn't appreciated just how many faces Hell could wear.

The problems saddling this world's Buffy were beyond her reckoning. She didn't know how to move forward without Giles, how to talk to an Angel who didn't love her, worry about the legalities of being alive or dead, or exist with a Spike who not only loved her but knew intimately what it was to be loved by her. Knowing everything that had come before didn't change that—didn't give her magical insight. It made everything worse, driving home that escape from her own life had never been realistic, no matter what she wished.

All she had now was context, and context solved nothing.

"I have to find a way back," Buffy said hoarsely. "This is too much. I can't stay here, Spike."

"No," he agreed, lighting up another cigarette, "you can't."

She didn't know what it meant that his ready agreement hurt, but it did.

8

THE MORE YOU KNOW YOU KNOW YOU DON'T KNOW SHIT

SPIKE HADN'T SAID ANYTHING IN A FEW MINUTES, RATHER LET HER sit with an overfull brain insistent on tugging her in a thousand directions. Every time she settled on an area—*Angel, Dawn, Dad*—something else would pop up, an observation or a rogue thought or even the hint of an unnamed feeling, and she'd find herself torn down another path, in another direction, barraged all over again with images and sensations of a life that wasn't hers.

Then came the doubts, the fears and worries. She had to go back to the world she'd left, the one that was somehow better than this one, but she had no idea where to start. The only thought she'd had before was to find the monkey's paw. Sure, she'd had no idea what she'd do with it once she found it—if destroying the thing would undo the things she'd wished—but it had been a starting point. Find the paw and go from there.

Except the paw was at the center of more than just her wishes. She wondered how long it would be before Spike realized that. If he already had, and if that was why he'd mentioned finding alternative wish-means by which to get her back where she belonged. And conversely, what he would do if he learned the only way to get back this world's Buffy was destroying the thing that would ensure Dawn

came home. Would he make the right choice? Would *she,* knowing that she might never get back where she belonged?

The more she thought, the more dead ends she encountered, and the more that terrible pressure in her chest rose. It was worse than it had been before. At least then she'd been the only one suffering. Even in those moments in which she'd entertained the darkest of dark thoughts, when the only thing keeping her from death was the fear of killing herself, she had been the only one with anything of value to lose. Yes, the others would mourn her, but once Spike told them about Heaven—as he undoubtedly would—she trusted that her actions would make sense. There would be recriminations and guilt, Dawn would suffer greatly knowing that Buffy had felt taking her own life was the only way to reach any kind of peace again, but she would ultimately heal. Understand. They all would, and they would learn to live without her. Carry on as best they could, and possibly even let her go.

There was some terror in realizing that taking her own life now would have repercussions beyond the obvious. The body she inhabited wasn't entirely hers. It belonged to a Buffy who was married to Angel, a Buffy who loved Spike and was fighting now to bring her sister home. And there was this world's Dawn, who might not even know her sister was back from the dead. While Buffy hadn't let herself entertain thoughts of suicide too much, knowing the option had been there, that she could yank on that ripcord anytime the burden of living became too suffocating, had let her catch her breath in the moments when her lungs struggled to work. That ripcord wasn't available over here. Not without killing someone else—a Buffy who, despite everything, seemed ready to fight rather than curl up and surrender. This world's Buffy had a reason to keep going.

The things she'd learned settled alongside the things she'd been carrying ever since she'd fought her way out of her grave, her brain seeming to bend under the weight. And at last, after a long stretch of nothing, she broke.

He was on the other side of the crypt when the first sob burst from her lips, busying himself with the dishes—*Spike did dishes*—and right there beside her the next second. There was no reason for any of this to feel normal, natural, but somehow it did. Spike's arms around her,

his chest rumbling as he fed her soft words of comfort, his hands stroking along the back of her head. It was strange, losing control like this. She hadn't cried in anyone's arms in so long—since Angel, really. Hadn't let herself fall apart except when she was alone. Hadn't felt anyone else was strong enough to hold her up, could accept her weakness when she could barely accept it herself.

He'd told her a lot about his relationship with this world's Buffy, but there was even more in what he wasn't saying. That this felt as right as it did meant something beyond stories—or rather, gave those stories weight, the same way the crypt did. The shelves stocked with Buffy favorites, the cool ease with which he had ordered dinner, placed in her hand the only beer she'd ever actually liked, all without thought. It all meant something.

It also hurt. None of what she saw was hers. She had the right face and all the right parts but she wasn't the right Buffy.

That shouldn't matter but it did. Somehow.

"Sorry," she said a moment later, forcing herself to pull away and trying hard not to read too much into the fact that she wished she didn't have to. In the time since she'd been back, she'd only allowed herself to lean on Spike in the metaphorical sense. Always flirting with more, knowing that was what he wanted and what she could take if she was brave enough, but also adhering to the line she'd drawn. "I guess it just all caught up with me. I'll try not to go to pieces on you in the future."

Spike offered a half-grin, palming her cheek in a move that felt both overly intimate and incredibly familiar. Like her body remembered what her mind did not.

"All you've been through, love, you've earned the right to go to pieces anytime you fancy."

"Well, I don't. Fancy, that is. I'd really prefer to not." She tried for a smile that felt more like a wince. "I should probably get going soon. Still have a coffeepot to grab and all."

"Sod it. Take the one here. I'll just nick another."

"I let you steal things in this world a lot, huh?"

He shrugged a shoulder, the half-grin from before growing a bit wider. "Reckon you think there's more important evil to stop on most

days. Sometimes you really let me have it." He winked. "Sometimes that's half the bloody fun."

Her chest tightened. All of her did. There were things she still didn't understand—things she thought maybe she was better off not pursuing at all. Still, the way Spike talked about her couldn't help but make her wonder, as part of her had—willingly or not—wondered from the start. Learning he was in love with her had upended her world in a lot of ways, first because it had seemed impossible—like he'd gotten bored one day and thought he'd try his hand at playing one of the good guys for real. Or maybe she'd hit him a bit too hard and his brain, already compromised due to the electrical currents that kept him in check, had landed on an impossible conclusion. Whatever the reason, Buffy had been confident that whatever Spike felt wasn't love or anything remotely close to it. Just a weird, gross vampire thing he'd dragged her into. He'd always had a slayer fixation, after all, and a twisted sense of what constituted romance. With so much time on his hands and no other available means of being destructive, perhaps it had only been a matter of time before he convinced himself that he had the hots for the enemy.

Then Glory had captured him and he'd done something Buffy would never have thought possible. Something that a man in love would actually do—something that had forced her to look at him as she never had. More than that, she'd accepted that the thing he felt was real, or as real as it could be for a vampire. That perhaps it wasn't her version of love, but it was *a* version, and wrong or not, it had brought him to her side. Made him an ally. Made him someone she could trust.

And once that door opened, the other doors had too. There hadn't been a ton of time between Glory's torture session and Buffy's swan dive, and that meager had been occupied with anxiety and a looming sense of inevitability regarding the end of her own story. But there had been a few stolen moments here and there in which she'd found herself thinking about Spike and wondering.

Those thoughts had made it easy for her to seek him out after she'd been torn from Heaven. Those thoughts plus the way he looked at her, how he seemed so willing to be whatever she

needed *when* she needed, and the lack of expectation he brought to every encounter. No egos to tend, either. No need to be anything other than Buffy. Buffy as she was and not as he wanted her to be. Just Buffy.

Now she was with Spike—a version of him, at least—and the questions her mind had never been brave enough to tackle were being answered. The world around her might be a funhouse variation of the one she knew but it was close enough to strip her of any illusion that she was safe from what it revealed. Even the things she hadn't wanted to think possible had twisted enough in her head that she found herself wondering.

Had the demon that burst into Angel's office that day really been the sort that could turn him human? Her memory of the visit wasn't exactly stellar—buried under hurt, time, and death—but the more she thought about it, the more the scene solidified. Angel leaping into action, killing the creature without effort or hesitation. That alone wasn't indicative of much—Angel was more than capable of killing demons without breaking whatever the vampire equivalent was for a sweat—but that Spike had mentioned it at all, and that it *had* happened in her world as well, made it the sort of thing she couldn't just dismiss.

And if she couldn't dismiss that, then she couldn't dismiss anything else he'd said.

"Do you think I'll leave him?" Buffy found herself asking. When Spike arched an eyebrow, she rubbed her arms and drew in on herself. "All the things you said... Angel taking out an insurance policy on me, sending Dawn to Dad, putting the house up for sale... The things *he's* said to me since I've been here, I wonder if he's waiting for one of us to say uncle or something."

Spike tilted his head, working his throat. "Dunno," he said. "Bloke can hope, though, can't he?"

"If I did leave him, do you think the excitement would go away?"

"Excitement?"

"You know. Sneaking around. Getting away with something right under his nose."

"Ooh, you havin' fun, then? Get a little thrill when you crawled

back into your marital bed last night with another man's spunk in your snatch?"

Buffy recoiled so fast she nearly gave herself whiplash. Once again, the urge to punch him arose, hard and swift, so much so that she had to dig her nails into her palms to keep herself from raising her fist. Not that she knew exactly *why* she was stopping herself—might have something to do with the way he'd held and comforted her a second ago. Comforted her. Confused her. Made her forget who he was. Who he *always* was, regardless of what the world looked like.

"Thank you," she snapped, struggling to her feet. "For a second I forgot that you're a disgusting pig. That's a mistake I won't make again."

"Touched a nerve, I see." Spike had the audacity to laugh at her. "Not insultin' at all, is it, to assume the only reason I have a yen for the Slayer is because she's with another bloke? Guess I should just take that one lying down?"

"That's not what I said."

"It's exactly what you said, pet. You think that's all this is? Think I chased the Nibblet across the sodding west coast for kicks? I'm in love with you. With *Buffy*. If she ever kicked that miserable sack to the curb where he belongs, would be the happiest day of my life." He also rose to his feet with that liquid grace that couldn't help but remind her he was a predator underneath. "Spent more than a century devoted to one woman. Would still be with her if she hadn't given me the old heave-ho."

"Which she only did because you said she knew how you felt about me."

"Right."

"So that couldn't happen again? Once the excitement's gone, you wouldn't just...fall in love with someone else?"

He laughed again, like the question was ridiculous. Like she didn't have very good reasons to ask. "Dru woulda been fine with me runnin' around on her," he said calmly. "Insisted on it a time or two. Liked bringin' toys to bed. Didn't mind if I wanted to play with my food, either. Sometimes she insisted on that too. And what did I do? Every-

thing I bloody could to make her happy, whatever it was. Even if I wasn't hot to do it, I did it. Because of her."

Her stomach roiled. "You're disgusting."

"Yeah. Maybe. But it was what she wanted. All about her. And yeah, she'd toy with other blokes. Sometimes just to torture me, which also got her hot. Nothin' she loved more than drivin' me outta my noggin, knowing she was it for me." He began prowling forward, and even in the dark she could see his eyes narrowing. "That was the difference, see. What I did I did for her. Always for her. She was everythin' I wanted. And that was just the way she liked me—on my knees, servin' her, lettin' her do whatever she bloody pleased. She liked me well enough, maybe even loved me a little, however she could, but not like I did. And I knew it. Knew it when we were a happy family slaughtering villages alongside Darla and Angelus, and I knew it after he took off. But for a stretch there, once he was gone, I could convince myself that things had changed. That without her daddy around, she'd see what she had in me. The same she'd never have in him."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because that's why I fell in love with you, you daft twig. You love the way I do—all blood and heart and soul. And you'd do *anything* for the people you love." Spike stopped, just a pace or so away now. "Didn't know someone could love the way I did until I saw you. All you were willin' to do for that ponce. Burrowed in deep. Made me realize that was what I wanted." He swallowed. "You were what I wanted. Dru couldn't stand not bein' all I thought about anymore."

"But that—"

"And that's what I have with you. Here. Doesn't look the way I want it, of course, but that's how you love me." He sighed and looked away, some of the stiffness in his shoulders relaxing. "More than that, too. It's who you are. How you never give up, how you fight with everythin' you are, how you always *try,* no matter the odds. I love you like I've never loved anyone and would go to the end of the sodding earth to prove it. So yeah, *Slayer,* you ask me if I'd lose interest once you could be mine completely? If you knew me at all, you'd know that's not me. Not you, either. You don't go behind Angel's back 'cause it gets your rocks off. You do it because you don't

love him and feel, with that big bloody heart of yours, that it'd be crueler to cut him loose when you're all he has in this sodding world. Or were, at least, before you kicked it. Dunno how you feel now. But no matter what you decide, I'll be where I've always been. Right beside you."

The air around them fell still, save for the hard breaths ricocheting against her chest. Her skin was hot, sweaty, like she had just run a marathon. The words had struck something inside her, something tender and sore. A piece of herself that she'd gone to the desert to find, only to be told she was full of love and love would lead her to her gift. That had comforted her at the moment, being full of love, but she hadn't felt it at all until that moment on the tower's platform, the sun cresting over the horizon and the world descending into chaos. There had been flickers here and there, flickers that seemed to vanish the second she gave chase.

Spike was describing a Buffy whose love-meter apparently wasn't broken. One who had found the thing she'd spent the entirety of her relationship with Riley trying to feel, consciously or not. Maybe Angel was what had done it—instead of breaking her heart the way he had in her world, he had lost it in increments to someone else. Loving again, scary, messy love, wouldn't have terrified *that* Buffy like it had terrified her.

The thought alone was too big for her brain, especially on top of everything else, and she didn't want to sit with it. So she cast about for a distraction. It was either that or actually leave, but she didn't want to do that, either.

"Do you often bite me during sex?"

That question was apparently enough to throw him off his game. Not for long, but long enough. He narrowed his eyes at her. "Been wonderin' on that a lot, have you?"

"Sorry. It just...came out."

"Why's it you wanna know?" he asked, a slight edge to his voice.

"I don't know." Buffy looked down, hugging herself. "Just...occurred to me that Angel and I must not be physical or anything if you're biting me on the regular. That seems like the kind of thing he'd notice."

"You're talkin' like he pays attention to anythin' other than himself, love." He snickered. "Sorry to burst your bubble."

"So we don't. At all."

Spike shook his head, giving her a look that was a little too knowing for her liking. "Stopped shagging sometime last year, far as I can tell."

"Far as you can tell? What does that mean?"

"Means you stopped smelling like his jizz."

Her stomach gave a roil in complaint. "That's disgusting."

"Yeah, well, won't hear me arguin'."

"You can *smell* that?"

"More than I want to." He snickered again, then turned and strolled away as though done with the conversation. But then he started talking again once he was situated in front of the tub filled with their used dishes. "Told you as much once last year, too, back before you realized what a handsome, shaggable devil I am. It had been a month or so since I'd gotten a whiff of it and asked if there was trouble in paradise. You popped me in the nose."

Good. That saved her the trouble of having to do it now.

"So Angel and I aren't sleeping together," she said, thinking now about the man who had greeted her the night before. Chowing down on chips and drinking beer like it was his job, not so much as flicking a look in her direction until she'd drawn his attention to her. "Have we not since...you and I started our thing?"

Spike hesitated then glanced over his shoulder. "Never ask."

"But you can smell it."

"Scrub yourself good enough, Slayer, and—"

"But—"

"I don't wanna know, all right?" Now he whirled around again, bits of soapy water soaring through the air with the force of it. "Can't bloody stand the thought of him touchin' you. It was bad enough when it was Dru, but she was never mine, was she? Always on the hook, waitin' for Daddy to come and swoop her up again. Not like it is with you. Never had a chance of bein' hers the way I'm yours, or knowin' she was..." Spike trailed off, breathing hard, then tightened his jaw and tore his eyes from hers. "You asked me to bite you and I did. And you

kept wantin' it—needin' it. What's a man got to do but give the woman he loves what she wants?"

"Needing it?"

"Little death wish yours truly can fulfill every night since you know I won't give you the other one."

"It started after I came back, then. The biting."

He waited a beat, nodded and sighed. "Yeah. Second or third time, you wanted it harder. I gave it to you. Not enough, though, you said. You wanted it hard enough to hurt. Lost control and my fangs came out." Spike pressed his eyes closed and breathed another long breath, the sort she'd come to associate with restraint. "After, you said somethin' about bein' more careful the next time. That spot I got you last night—that's where you like it the most."

Something flickered across his face, more of the same of what she'd seen before. The reproach, the shame, the guilt of having a *last night* to reference because he felt he should have known. And again, she didn't know how to handle it—the knowledge that it bothered him as much as it did. That he understood as much as he did, that logical or not, it would hurt to know someone didn't know her well enough to know. Even if the woman he'd confused her with happened to be another version of her—a version that could have easily been her had one little thing gone differently.

That was hard to swallow as well—the fact that this world no longer seemed impossible to her. That, sometime over the last couple of hours, the version of Angel that lived here felt more like the Angel she knew or could have known. Part of her held out, though, that he had it wrong. Had to, because the other thing meant letting go of something she'd held onto for so long she wasn't sure who she was without it.

"You said you won't kill me," Buffy said after she found her voice. "That you won't give me my death wish. Is that something I've asked you to do?"

Spike kept his gaze on the stone floor for a moment. "No. You know the answer."

"But you *can* bite me so does that mean you could kill me, if you wanted?"

"Drop it."

"You said you had the chip here. Do you not anymore?"

"Slayer—"

"Because you didn't have a reaction when you bit me last—"

"Right," Spike said shortly, his jaw tight. "Tell me it hurt when I bit you. Tell me you didn't clamp down on my cock and come harder than you have in your life. Tell me you didn't love every second. Say it and make me believe it and I'll tell you exactly why the sodding chip didn't fire. Savvy?"

Heat flooded her cheeks at that, and she hated that it did. But then she'd asked for it. Spike inside of her, his mouth on her skin, how he pumped and pushed and filled her up, and the bite had all of it coalescing into something beyond anything she'd experienced in the past. He'd sliced his fangs into her skin and she'd gone nuclear with pleasure. Pain had flickered, yes, but a good sort of pain. Pain she could see herself craving. Hell, she already did.

And there was a heady thought—one she didn't want but couldn't fight, any more than she could the knowledge of just how good that bite had felt. She wanted more of what she'd experienced last night. That blissful, numbing pleasure that had chased away bad thoughts and worse feelings. She wanted him, full-stop. To feel that loved, *cherished*, again. Let him take away this awful world and its consequences and everything else. It was wrong, yeah, but nothing else was right, so what did a little wrong matter?

There was the slight issue that Spike was loyal to this world's Buffy, but he'd also admitted they were the same. Said that since she was Buffy, he loved her, too. That had to mean something, didn't it?

"Have I said it?" she asked. "Since I came back?"

"Said what?"

"That I love you?"

Spike recoiled as though she'd slapped him. "What the bleeding hell are you playing at, Slayer? Tryin' to make it hurt, is that it?"

"No, I just... I haven't felt anything. Not until last night." Buffy's eyes stung again, new tears brimming there, threatening to topple over. That was what she hated about crying, how easy it was to start again once she stopped. How quickly she could lose herself when she knew

she couldn't afford to. "The only time I come close is when I'm with you."

"Yeah, you sung me this one already. Stringin' that poor git along on your side."

"I am not stringing him along."

"Only feel when you're with him, this bloke who's so arse-over-heels in love with you he doesn't know how to bloody think straight?" Spike arched an eyebrow as though daring her to argue the point. "She didn't know I was lost for her when she first started hangin' around. Reckon she wouldn't have otherwise, and it bloody well knocked her for a six when I let it out. But by then she was in deep, herself. You ask if she's told me she loves me since she's been back? Yeah. Every sodding night. Meet up for patrol, talk out the things you're not sharin' with your mates, and more about how we're gonna get the Bit back from your old man, then we shag each other rotten and you tell me again and again that you love me. Nights he goes off to lose his allowance at cards or you're off with your mates, we steal away. And if ever you need to tell me somethin' but can't risk runnin' by, there's the notes."

"Notes?"

He nodded. "Leave 'em in the notch in that rosewood at Shady Hill."

"Shady Hill? Why there?"

"Figure less conspicuous, you leavin' love notes in a tree in a different graveyard, yeah?" Spike lifted a shoulder—another one of those *as though it matters* gestures that she knew was his way of covering for the fact that it mattered a lot. Everything mattered to Spike. "Also, we don't use our names."

"We don't?"

He shook his head, a smile that managed to be both fond and pained tugging at his lips. "In the beginnin', you said some rot about how Angel was the Romeo to your Juliet, couldn't believe things went as south as they did. Never did read the full play, did you?"

Buffy frowned. "I know they die."

"Slayer, Romeo and Juliet were two bloody children who got a load of people killed because they decided they loved each other at first

sodding glance and bugger all else. The girl was thirteen, the boy Dawn's age. You really fancy that comparison?" Spike studied her for a moment before breaking off with another grin. "Told you we were more than that. Keep bloody Romeo and Juliet. You and me? We're Benedick and Beatrice."

"What and who?"

"Benedick and Beatrice. They start off as enemies until they realize that they're perfect for each other. Still Shakespeare, and this one at least ends well. You—*she* liked that. Perfectly matched, happy ending to boot. So that's what we call each other in the notes." He shrugged, still grinning. "Dunno what good it'll do if Angel ever found 'em. Wager he knows your handwriting well enough to put two and two together. Might be a thick git but he's not *that* bloody thick."

Buffy nodded to show she understood when of course she didn't. But this wasn't her world, her life—the decisions that had led her here hadn't been *her* decisions. She wasn't the Buffy who was two years deep into a bad marriage, nor was she the Buffy who had decided to do the one thing she'd always promised herself she wouldn't. The logistics of an affair—an affair that was both emotional and physical—weren't hers to figure out.

"And the others don't know," Buffy said. "About you and me? Not even Willow?"

Spike huffed like she'd said something funny. "More people know, more chances are it gets back to him, right? No one knows, far as I can tell. Doesn't mean they won't catch wise one of these nights. Keep tellin' you they will, point of fact."

"And Angel definitely doesn't know."

"Hasn't come at me with a stake yet. Hasn't tossed it in her face, either. Safe to say the berk woulda high-tailed it after making some grand speech about all he sacrificed if he ever sussed it out." At that, he flashed her a flat smile, then jerked his head at the door. "Best be gettin' on, yeah? Appearances to keep, and what all. Don't much fancy muckin' up my Slayer's life while she doesn't have the wheel."

Buffy nodded, wetting her lips, but otherwise not moving. It was still there, that thing she wanted. Needed. It might not be hers...but it was Buffy's, and she was Buffy. "You really think you'll get her back."

"No matter of *think* about it, pet."

"But what if destroying the monkey's paw is the only way to make this right?" She hadn't quite meant to blurt that out the way she had, but there was nothing for it now. The question was out there, between them. "If we destroy it, then there goes the chance to get Dawn back."

Spike blinked at her, shook his head. "Yeah, 'cause you've never managed the impossible before. Never known you to throw in the towel without a fight."

"I'm not throwing in the towel. I'm just—"

"Slayer, dunno how else to say it, but you're not stayin' here. One way or another, we get you back where you belong. You *both* back."

"But what if this *is* where I belong?" she shot back, reckless and wild. "I *wished* for this, Spike. What if I made this world with my wish and you didn't actually exist two days ago? What if we find the paw and we can't destroy it, or destroying it doesn't matter? Or we learn that it's the *only* way to get Dawn back? And why the hell does my father suddenly care about her, anyway? If he knows I'm back, wouldn't he just want to hand her off as quickly as possible? Have I tried just *calling* him and letting him know—"

"What?" Spike barked, rigid with anger again. "That his eldest crawled outta her grave? Yeah. You tried that. The ponce took it about as well as he did learnin' that you weren't toys in the attic when he and your mum shoved you into that institution a few years back. Bloody hell, he knew enough to know what *I* was, enough to go to sodding Wolfram and Hart to keep me off his back. Dunno what they pitched him but it was enough to have him thinkin' there's no worse place in the world for the Bit than with you. And how are you gonna fight it, eh? You're still *dead*, pet. At least where it counts to these gits."

Right. She was legally dead—a step that had apparently not been taken in her world. One that had completely escaped her as a possibility. Much like the thought that her father would ever give enough of a damn about either of his daughters to assume parental responsibilities—that he would ever, as her mother had, realize that she hadn't been lying when she'd gone to them with stories of vampires. And hell, that Spike knew *that* much...

God, she really loved him, this world's Buffy. Loved *and* trusted

him. Those were things she'd never told anyone. Not Giles, not even Angel.

"As for the rest," Spike said, jarring her back to herself. "Doesn't matter."

Buffy blinked, not understanding. "What?"

"Same thing as the Nibblet, yeah? About a year old now but I got me a head stuffed full of memories. You do too." He pressed the tips of his index and middle finger to his temple to emphasize the point. "All in here. That's where it matters. Don't know a lot, Slayer, but I know I'm bloody well not living in a world where Buffy doesn't love me the way I love her. We're findin' that sodding paw. Findin' a way to get you back. Get *her* back. You can go back to your tidy little world to torture your lovesick whipping boy. This one'll spin just fine without you."

Her mind stuttered—everything did. Over the years, Spike hadn't been shy of hurling words meant to slice and scar. It was one of the things he did best, get under her skin, but not like this. Never before like this. Never about *them*.

She didn't know what to say except *I'm Buffy* but that wouldn't be enough. Not for him.

Spike held her gaze for a long moment, breathing hard as though daring her to contradict him, then broke away in a fury of movement. And in a blink he was in front of her, pressing a coffeepot into her hands.

"Take this to your honey-bear," he said thickly. "Tomorrow, we tear the bloody shop apart together, yeah?"

She nodded shakily. It was all she could do.

"Right. Then, Slayer, you know the way out."

He turned his back on her, dismissed her as he never had before, leaving her something less than hollow and completely lost as to how the conversation had gone so badly so fast.

More than that—certain that she couldn't navigate a world where not even Spike could stand the sight of her.

9

AND I TWISTED IT WRONG JUST TO MAKE IT RIGHT

The coffeepot was obviously not new. Buffy wondered if that were the sort of thing Angel would even notice. Probably not, if Spike hadn't hesitated to shove it in her hands to get her out the crypt. Whatever else, he was intent on preserving his Buffy's way of life as much as possible, which included sending her home before the husband could ask too many questions—or maybe that had just been a handy excuse. He hadn't seemed too interested in keeping her around. If this world's Buffy had been at his crypt tonight, lost and in crisis, Spike's tune would have been different.

It was a rather rude awakening, realizing just how much Buffy relied on Spike. The past couple of weeks had been an exercise in denial. The periods she spent alone too full of silence, but not the right sort of silence. A silence that made her feel more dead than alive, but not the right sort of dead, either. The sort where she was always awake, always aware, always feeling the things she didn't want to feel, thinking the things she didn't want to think. Her friends made everything worse, and of course she couldn't tell them that. Couldn't burden them with the knowledge that they had condemned her to a life that felt like living hell. They wanted those silences filled, her friends did, and they wanted her to do the filling. Be

grateful. Smile. Dance. Slay. Play the part of Buffy Summers, pre-mortem.

Spike didn't expect that—nor did he live in silence. Which was weird, she had to admit, considering he didn't technically live at all. And that peace, that ability to just be the Buffy she was rather than the Buffy everyone wanted her to be, had become essential to surviving the awful world she'd been thrust back inside.

She'd known—of course she'd known—that telling this world's Spike the truth about who she was and where she was from would come at the cost of that intimacy they had shared. But part of her also hadn't known—had held out that Spike, whose devotion to her she'd somehow become dependent upon, would be Spike about everything. Buffy was Buffy, after all. He'd made a robot in her likeness when he couldn't have the real thing—was it so out there to think that he might just go with the flow? He'd said he loved her, after all, and she knew that love was something Spike took seriously.

Just more seriously than she'd wanted to believe, deep down.

Buffy dragged herself up the familiar steps to her familiar home feeling vaguely like something a truck had run over. She paused at the front door, gave the coffeepot a long look and wondered what she would say if Angel asked her why the hell she'd brought home something clearly used. If she cared enough to lie about it or if she could do this world's Buffy a solid by pulling the plug on her less-than-fairytale marriage. But then she thought of Spike again and decided it was better to keep the boat unrocked. Regardless of whether or not she'd made this world by wishing it, the people who lived inside of it were real. This Buffy's life wasn't one she had the luxury of screwing up.

Spike would help her because he wanted the woman who loved him back. Once that was done and everyone was where they were supposed to be, and with the versions of people they were supposed to be with, the whole thing could come out. Or not. It wasn't her call.

Buffy drew in a breath and pushed the front door open, then sagged a bit when she saw the living room was dark. Even better—she wouldn't have to see Angel at all. Just clean the coffeepot and put it in the empty slot. Seeing as she had no experience being the adulterer, the less time she had to devote to coming up with cover stories, the

better. Surely this world's Buffy had it down to an art now, if she and Spike had been sneaking around for nearly a year.

After giving the pot a good scrub, Buffy made her way upstairs, where a rustling from the bedroom informed her that her husband was not out on the town. She wasn't sure what it said about her that she wished he were—or better yet, that Angel himself was entangled in a steamy affair of his own. Regardless of what Spike had told her, or what she gathered to be this world's Buffy's very good reason to emulate her father, the entire concept that she was having an affair was almost harder to reconcile than everything she had learned about Angel. Her mind was crowded with too many memories of finding her mother with swollen eyes and a ready, fake smile. That sick I-just-know-it feeling that she had been forced to accommodate when thinking about the causes of her parents' divorce. Buffy had never promised herself not to be unfaithful to someone—it had just been a given. Cheating was what bad people did, and Buffy was not bad people.

Also, she thought as she made her way to the bedroom, maybe she shouldn't trust that Spike's account of things was entirely accurate. While Angel had been nothing but abrasive with her since she'd arrived, he was also the wronged party. Maybe the reason he seemed to resent her was because he *did* know about the affair, regardless of what everyone thought. He'd been a detective in LA, after all, and he definitely wasn't stupid.

He also wasn't the Angel she thought she knew. Her Angel wouldn't be lounging on a bed, cleaning his gun.

"I don't like that thing," Buffy blurted without meaning to, then winced when Angel started. Right. Because he wasn't a vampire, hadn't heard her approach. That would take some getting used to, and frankly, she hoped not to be here long enough for it to stick.

"It's perfectly safe unless you sneak up on someone while they have it out," he replied in that terse tone from earlier. He held her gaze for a moment before returning his attention to the firearm. "Guessing it was another banner day at the Magic Box."

"I didn't find it," she said, glad to know what he was referring to.

"That's a shame."

Buffy felt her temper creeping up again and did what she could to

shove it back down. "I got a new coffeepot. It's all ready for tomorrow."

"Great."

That was all he said, his attention fixed entirely on the gun. She watched the way his hands moved over the metal, how at-ease he seemed with it. This guy who had once balked at her suggestion of adding a television to the mansion he'd called home—made her feel every bit a teenager for even having the thought, much less voicing it. Now he was sitting on a bed they shared in a room that used to be her mother's, one that had a television—somehow she had missed this in her earlier tour of the house—perfectly positioned for days in which he might want to recline against the headboard while channel surfing.

Maybe addressing the mind-fuck that was their marriage wouldn't be so horribly intrusive after all. Married people talked about their problems, right? Even if this world's Buffy was no longer in love with Angel, it couldn't hurt to open the lines of communication. Maybe it would help both of them get to the place they needed to be in order to officially move on.

"I ran into Anya at the Magic Box," she said tentatively, stepping farther into the room. "She still seems pretty upset."

Angel kept his gaze on his handiwork until she was standing across from the bed. The look he gave her was of utter indifference and lasted only as long as it took him to feed her his dismissive reply. "Yeah, well, she'll get over it."

Then he bowed his head again, once more fixated on the firearm.

"I don't think she will," Buffy pressed on. "She's furious with Giles...and I can see why. I mean, I was dead for five months and he never bothered to update any of that paperwork?"

He grunted, which could be either commiserative or an indication that he agreed with her. Or just a sound to fill the silence in lieu of an actual response.

"Angel. Can you put the gun down? I'm trying to have a conversation here."

He sighed, long and tired, his shoulders dropping. "Is it time already?"

"Time for what?"

"This conversation."

"I'm sorry that talking to your wife is such a chore," she said with more fire than she intended, but damn, he wasn't giving her anything.

"We don't talk, Buffy. *You* talk. You tell me what I've done wrong and get mad when I try to come up with suggestions. Excuse me for not being in the mood for another scolding."

"Is this really what our life is?" The words were out before she could stop them, but they seemed to do what everything else she'd fired at him hadn't. At last, Angel was looking at her with something other than annoyance or apathy. She'd actually managed to surprise him. "You clearly don't want to be here, so why are you?"

"Why am I here?" He blinked at her dumbly. "I'm your husband, that's why."

"You're a widower."

"You look pretty alive to me."

"I mean on paper, Angel. On paper, you're a widower. You made sure that I was dead so you could cash that check the second it came in."

It felt careless, leaning on information that she'd gotten from Spike, a bit like playing Russian roulette with the truth. There was a second to wonder if she'd spoken in haste, if she should have waited until she had confirmed his version of things with someone with less Angel-bias, but only a second.

Angel rolled his eyes and set the firearm aside. "Okay. So we're doing this."

"Excuse me for wanting some answers."

"No, you just hope I'll give you one that gets you off the hook."

"Off the hook? For what, exactly?"

"For the decision I made," he snapped, springing to his feet with energy that almost seemed vampiric—almost. There was a definite whine in his bones and more looseness in the way his skin moved over muscle. Then there was the breathing—not the breaths he used to take when discussing how much he loved her, but ones of exertion. She knew the difference. "Or the decision I was *going* to make. The right decision, even if it hurt. I was trying to be strong for both of us. I was trying to keep you alive."

Buffy blinked. "Keep me alive?"

"But you knew better, didn't you? 'Angel, you went away so I could have a normal life with a normal guy.' 'Angel, this is everything we wanted.' 'Angel, I thought you loved me.' Like walking away wasn't torture enough. Like I *didn't* feel that pain every day we were apart." He stared at her for a moment as though daring her to tell him otherwise, then broke away, shaking his head. "The Oracles told me you'd die if I stayed human. I knew that and you did too. But you talked me out of doing the right thing, and look what happened."

The Oracles had told him what? Who were the Oracles? Buffy frowned, her temples beginning to throb, a new avalanche of questions surging against the edges of her mind, uncaring that she was already buried in what she'd learned. But everything in this world seemed to stem back to that visit to LA, the one that in her memory had been painful and brief. Uneventful, save to reopen a wound she'd done a lousy job of letting heal in the first place.

"I would have died anyway," she muttered. "Glory was always going to come after me. Always."

"We don't know that," Angel shot back, still all fire. "If I'd had the strength I had as a vampire, I could have stopped it. I could have stopped all of that."

Yeah, maybe. Only he hadn't. Buffy had been in the fight of her life and Angel had shown up once to steal a few kisses between LA adventures as a consolation prize for her mother being six feet under. To his credit, she was pretty sure he'd offered to stay and she'd been the one to turn him down...but she was also pretty sure that offer hadn't been made in earnest. Rather the sort of thing one said to someone who was grieving—*if there's anything I can do to help, if there's anything you need,* and a bunch of other platitudes meant as silence-fillers. Because she had asked Angel to stay. She'd begged him to stay. She'd stood there in the sewer as he broke her heart right before she went to war, and he'd told her that it was better if they weren't together. And believing that had been such a part of her identity that Angel hadn't even had to pretend to make the offer for real. He'd said it knowing perfectly well that he wouldn't have to do anything to follow through. Knowing, apparently, that something large enough to cause her death was on the horizon

and doing diddly with a side of squat to help her. Or hey, even give her a warning. Native American spirits crash her Thanksgiving, that warrants an in-person stalking. Oracles warn she is on a fast track toward death and not even a cursory heads-up.

And Angel was also being disingenuous. Whatever problems their marriage had predated the swan dive, since the affair definitely did. If nothing else, seeing the crypt as Spike had it now had her convinced that his version of their relationship was more or less true. Of the things he might have gotten wrong, that clearly wasn't one of them.

"Things started falling apart well before Glory," Buffy said.

Angel didn't argue—just stared. In her book, that was as good as an admission.

"But that was just the cherry, wasn't it?" she went on, not sure what sort of point she was trying to make but sensing—feeling—she was in the right.

"What?" he asked.

"You being a vampire never mattered to me. Not like it should have. Even after everything you put me through, I loved you. Would have done anything to make it work." Buffy took a step forward. "It didn't matter to me, but it mattered to you. It always mattered to you."

"Well, it had to matter to one of us."

"Yeah, that's what you said at the time."

"And I meant it," Angel ground out. "It had to matter. One of us had to think with a clear head. Do you think I liked it? Do you think I wanted to walk away?"

"But you were going to again. You turned human and you wanted to turn back."

"To keep you alive."

"Maybe that's what you told yourself."

Angel went quiet, the muscles in his neck strained and his jaw clamped so tight it was a wonder it didn't shatter. "You're talking about a decision I *didn't* make more than two years ago. I didn't go through with it, did I? For all the good it *didn't* do, I didn't go through with it."

"And you wish you had."

"You're damn right I do," he barked without hesitation. "And so do you. We've been pretending this last year that we didn't make a

mistake, but we're not fooling anyone, especially not each other. I had a *destiny*, Buffy. I was supposed to do something. The Powers kept me alive, sent me emissaries and put me on a path, and I gave that up because I was too weak to say no to you. So how do I spend my days? I could be out there making a difference, doing some good, helping in the fight, but I can't do that so I fill my hours with junk TV and think about everything I gave up so that I could be with you. And you stopped loving me a long time ago."

"Angel—"

"Do you really think I don't see that? That you still hold what happened with Faith over my head? You started pulling away after that. And then your mom and Dawn and everything with Glory, I became more and more obsolete, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it. You stopped loving me when things became real." There was menace in his eyes, as though he were daring her to look away. "When you realized, underneath it all, this is all I am. You had this idea of the way things would be and when that didn't pan out, you checked out of this marriage."

Buffy's heart flipped at the same time her stomach dropped. "Checked out of this marriage how?"

"You know how," he replied coolly. "A little more each day."

She thought he'd elaborate, but he didn't, rather stopped abruptly and shoved her into one of the louder silences of her life, all the things he'd said ringing in her head. The explanations Spike had given her earlier tonight unmasked as truths and not just conjecture. Buffy stared at him and he stared right back, and for the first time the thought crossed her mind that maybe she'd had it wrong, and she had never known Angel at all. It was ugly, that thought, upsetting and abrasive, and she wanted so badly to hold onto the belief that it was this world that was wrong—that the Angel here wasn't the Angel she knew—but the argument wasn't as convincing as it had been. She could see the path now, the one separating her Angel from this one. How he would feel shut out of the world, out of sorts and out of place, with nothing but the memory of what he'd once been capable of. Watching as her world grew more complicated and unable to be a part of it, no matter how hard she tried to tell him he already was.

Or perhaps with Faith's shadow over everything, even that had been a lost cause. Because Spike was right there too. It had hurt with Riley. With Angel, it would have devastated.

"So why don't you leave?" Buffy asked a moment later, her voice rougher than she would have liked. "Why are you still here?"

"Where am I gonna go?" Angel replied solemnly. "Where else is there for me?"

"Wherever you were while I was dead. Come on, Angel. You had a plan. You knew death was my gift and you prepared to cash in."

"That's not fair."

"Isn't it?"

"I had nothing," he shot back, his eyes flaring once more. "No identity, no social security number, no footprint of any kind as a human. Nothing that would work outside of Sunnydale. You think that was easy to learn overnight? I died before the American Revolution, Buffy. I never had to learn how to be human in this world, with or without a soul. I had to be ready to survive so I was."

"Well, that makes everything all right, doesn't it?"

"So, it was irresponsible of me to make preparations for your death when we both knew it was coming?"

"But it wasn't just my death—it was your escape. Ship Dawn off to Dad, put the house up for sale, pass Go and collect two hundred dollars. Or however much that policy was worth." A thrill ran down Buffy's spine and she edged forward a step, feeling increasingly reckless but unable to push the brakes. "So why come back at all? Why bother?"

At that, he looked away, hissing out a long breath. "Because it felt like I should be here if you were, considering what I gave up to be with you." A pause. "Do you think I like this? Any of it? It was supposed to be easy, you and me. We were supposed to be easy, or we fooled ourselves into thinking we were. But the truth is... God, Buffy, the truth is everything *was* clearer when you were gone. Like I could be somebody—anyone."

The backs of her eyes burned and that awful heaviness she couldn't seem to outrun settled on her chest once more. It would have been better

if he'd remained hostile and defensive, if he hadn't cracked and given her a glimpse of a past that didn't seem so far removed from the world she came from. That he sounded so defeated, resigned, made everything worse. Instead of her own heartbreak, she had his now, too. His disappointment that they weren't what they'd thought they'd be outside of what they were. The miserable truth that all they'd ever had to hold them together was the impossibility of their being together in the first place.

Maybe there had been no peace with Angel, and that was the reason that seeing him had left her feeling so empty.

"I thought about getting turned again," he went on. "Calling Willow, telling her to be ready to do the curse. Put things back the way they were supposed to be."

Buffy drew in a sharp breath. The blows just kept coming. "Why didn't you?" she asked hoarsely.

He was studying his hands now, carefully avoiding her gaze. "I don't know."

"And now?"

A beat. Then another. Then he exhaled, and all of him seemed to deflate. "I don't know. Guess I'm waiting for you to figure out what it is you want."

"What I want?"

"I gave up my destiny for you, Buffy. That puts you in charge of it." He sighed and again, shuffling back toward the bed. "You don't love me, but you won't admit it. You won't admit any of this was a mistake. You keep holding on. I don't know if it's guilt or just you being you. It can't just be me, though. You need to give me the respect of your honesty. Or hell, tell me this is all in my head. Tell me I've had it wrong and you do love me, after all. Tell me one or the other. Tell me *something*."

Tell him something. That seemed simple enough. Only there was nothing to tell—nothing she could tell, anyway, without possibly screwing up things even more than she already had. Just standing here, asking questions that might have been asked before, having a conversation that this world's Buffy and Angel had had a thousand times, as far as she knew. Or if they hadn't, unraveling the fabric of their relation-

ship even further, a step that this world's Buffy hadn't taken on her own just yet, whatever her reason.

Or perhaps she could tell Angel the truth of who she was. Let him know how strange this was for her, that in the world she'd come from he hadn't stayed human. His destiny, if destiny what it was, had remained unimpeded, and the last time they'd seen each other, it had been a somber experience. That she'd gone to him because the last man she could remember loving was Angel and she'd wanted—needed—to feel something like that again, even if only for a few minutes.

But she hadn't felt that at all. That had been the problem.

There was also the fact that telling Angel the truth didn't seem safe. At least not right now. She didn't know where that thought came from, only that it was less a thought and more an instinct, and Buffy had learned long ago to trust her instincts.

The only person she felt safe around was Spike.

Buffy released a slow breath, her gaze landing on the gun. "I can't stay here."

"What?" Again, he seemed surprised, though she wasn't sure why. She was having a hard time picturing them cuddling beside one another to go to sleep.

"I need to go." She headed toward the bed, hoping that enough of her world remained in this one that she'd find what she wanted beneath it. And she did—the same suitcase she'd taken with her to LA. Seemed oddly fitting to use it again now, running from Angel rather than running from her grief over losing him. The rest she did on autopilot, moving about the room as though she knew where everything was, and maybe her body did, because she found whatever she was looking for on the first try. Underwear, bras, socks, jeans and workout pants, blouses and tees. Angel watched her move, watched her disappear into the bathroom and return with a selection of toiletries and deodorant, but made no attempt to stop her.

Buffy remained in motion until she was at the door. There, she paused long enough to look over her shoulder, bring her gaze to his one last time. She didn't know what she expected—anger or frustration or perhaps, impossible as it seemed, for him to fall to his knees

and beg her to stay. But he didn't, of course, because that wasn't Angel. Not this one, anyway. It wasn't her, either.

The look on his face was one of deep resignation, almost disappointment. She couldn't say she blamed him.

She should say something. Apologize, tell him where she'd be or when she'd be back, that this wasn't his fault—not entirely, at least—and she had some thinking to do. But opening her mouth was as far as she got. Words wouldn't come. And the longer she stood there, the worse it became. It being *everything*.

So, at length, she turned, fixed her eyes dead ahead, and started for the stairs.

SHE REALLY HADN'T MEANT to end up back here. With the money this world's Buffy apparently had at her disposal, it would be nothing to check into the Sunnydale Inn for a few days. She had all the necessary things—purse with wallet, ID, and a bank account that wasn't hemorrhaging—and still, she'd be easy enough to find if something went way wrong. Or, in her case, wronger.

Going to a motel made sense.

What didn't make sense was standing outside of Spike's crypt, gripping her suitcase like she was ready for a sleepover.

But this was where her feet had carried her and even though she knew she wasn't wanted, Buffy found herself unable to move. The only place she'd felt remotely like herself since she'd landed in this reality was that crypt, and—she had a sinking feeling—not only because it was bedecked with all the hallmarks of home.

"Walk away," she muttered to herself, as though that would encourage her legs to work. "You're not the Buffy he wants."

The crypt door swung open at that with an intrusively loud whine, and Spike leaned against the doorway, wearing a button-up shirt that was mostly unbuttoned and cradling a glass tumbler filled with amber liquid. He looked a little bleary-eyed, resigned but unsurprised at seeing her there.

"Back so soon, are we?" he drawled, flashing her a drunken grin. "Miss me already?"

Buffy opened her mouth, closed it, then tightened her grip on her suitcase. "I couldn't stay there."

"'S that so?"

"Spike, you're drunk."

"'M *very* drunk," he agreed, pushing himself off the stone entryway to swagger forward. "And I intend to get even drunker. Don't stand there catchin' flies, now. You comin' in or what?"

Her heart leaped, though she tamped down on her relief before she could get too far ahead of herself. "You practically threw me out earlier. Told me to go home."

"Like you ever do what you're told, Slayer." He waggled his brows and flashed her a bit of tongue. "Only a matter 'f time before you came crawlin' back to me."

Something deep inside her twinged—the same something he'd stoked last night. Buffy's throat tightened. "Th-that's not what this is."

"No?"

"I should go to a motel."

"An' spend my lady's dosh? Got a bed you could cozy up in downstairs." There must have been something on her face, for the lavish leer on his vanished and he backed up a step, bringing up both hands, making the contents of his tumbler swish. "Not gonna touch you, 'f that's your worry. Look the part and smell just as sweet but you're not my girl."

Buffy swallowed, not quite willing to admit the falling sensation was disappointment. "You seemed to want me gone earlier."

"Not gone." Spike was stumbling toward her again, and in seconds, he was close enough that his scent was in her nostrils. It was a nice scent, what she could get that wasn't alcohol vapor, that was. "Jus'... hard to look at you, innit, when it's not you. When 's not..." He released a trembling sigh, somewhat slouched forward so that his brow was pressed to hers. "God, I miss you, baby. It's eatin' at me."

Her eyes were suddenly stinging, her lungs fighting harder for oxygen. The pang in her chest intensified, bolstered by both guilt and

hurt. "I'm sorry," she said, meaning it more than she ever had in her life. "I'm so sorry for all of this."

Spike pulled back, his eyes fluttering shut. He had nice eyes, she realized, and long lashes. "Know it," he said, looking at her again. "'S all right. We'll suss it out, you and I. But best get you some kip."

She nodded, and when he placed his hand on her elbow and nudged her forward, she didn't hesitate. No sense checking a gift horse's mouth. Whether or not a sober Spike would approve of his drunk counterpart's decision-making was a question for tomorrow. At the moment, Buffy was just grateful to have a place where she could breathe, if only for a little while.

She would worry about tomorrow when tomorrow came.

10

I KNOW IT SEEMS THAT I DON'T CARE. BUT SOMETHING IN ME DOES, I SWEAR

BUFFY AWOKE TO A TINGLING NECK. *VAMPIRE*, HER SENSES SCREAMED at her, forcing her to instant alertness. She jerked and sat up—or tried to. There was an arm around her middle, an arm pulling her firmly against a cool, solid chest. It took a moment, but the time delay separating drowsiness from conscious thought caught up with her, and she remembered where she was. More importantly, where she wasn't.

She was with Spike. Specifically, in Spike's bed. And Spike was curled around her. He hadn't started out that way—had shifted about as close to the edge of the mattress as he could get without falling off. If he'd been a bit more sober, she suspected he would've opted for somewhere else, but drunk Spike had been rather blasé about sharing the same space.

Apparently, though, he was a cuddler. He hadn't warned her about that.

Buffy released a slow breath, relaxing almost against her will, then turned her attention to what she could see of her surroundings. She hadn't had much occasion to snoop around the lower level of the crypt unless one counted looking for a certain peroxide pest to make sure he completely understood that they were never going to be a thing. In truth, Buffy didn't remember all that much about the layout. The

previous visit hadn't been a social call—or it had, but one with a business-like bend.

But that was in the other world. Her real one. The one where Spike loved her but hadn't said as much since she'd been back. Not with words, at least. His actions were a love letter all on their own. There was also the way he smiled whenever she showed up at his crypt at sundown—typically *right* at sundown these days. That wasn't an accident, though she tried to play like she wasn't waiting for nightfall. Like she had started patrolling early and found her way to his crypt before anything could leap out at her from the shadows.

Now, a world away and in the arms of another Spike, with her resistance worn down and everything around her in tatters, she could admit what she hadn't before—that she was playing a dangerous game. Like eyeing a particularly decadent piece of cheesecake in a bakery window, knowing she would regret the calories but not the taste. Spike had wiggled his way into her head and made himself at home, refusing to budge no matter how hard she tried to shove him out.

How had it happened for this world's Buffy? Spike had filled in the gaps, told her everything she needed to know to navigate this reality, but like the mouse in the children's book, she wanted more. She wanted to hear the conversations she'd missed, watch their relationship shift from mortal enemies to begrudging allies to full-fledged confidants. She wanted to see that moment Spike had mentioned, the night at the Bronze with Anya's trollish ex. It had been an unremarkable evening as far as she remembered—earned her the weapon of a god, though, so bonus—but to the Spike currently wrapped around her, it had been a milestone. Then the fight that had evidently had this world's Buffy throwing in the proverbial towel before throwing *herself* at him. She wondered how Spike had reacted, if his eyes had gone wide, if he'd gasped her name, or if he'd just surrendered without missing a beat, shoved her against whatever surface was nearest, and given her something to sing about.

Suddenly, that was all she could see—Spike pushing her up against a mausoleum, tearing hot kisses from her mouth as he hiked her skirt up her hips before fumbling with his belt and fly. Herself gasping into his mouth, linking her legs around his waist and telling him to hurry, hurry,

hurry, both because she needed it and because she wanted him to beat the second thoughts she knew would come. Before she changed her mind, before she realized what she was doing, let him be inside of her so she could remember what it was like to be loved and desired. To be with someone who understood her, truly understood her, in ways no one else ever had. Not even the man she'd thought she'd love forever.

Buffy closed her eyes, trying and failing to ignore the rising heat between her legs. Might have been easier had she not known exactly what he felt like, how well he filled her, how he moved, how he fucked. The things he'd said between breaths, how he'd touched and kissed and loved her all the while pounding her against the closet wall. There had been no in-between, which was something she hadn't experienced before. Riley had always been about sweet and tender lovemaking. On occasion, he might follow her lead and give it to her harder, but overall, he'd been an old-fashioned sort.

God, that had been annoying. But worth it, it had seemed at the time, to have something steady and reliable.

No wonder that relationship hadn't worked. She'd spent her evenings getting her rocks off the only way she could without investing in a vibrator and furthering the divide between them.

That wouldn't be a problem with Spike. He fucked the way he fought, with everything he was and then some. He'd asked her how she'd wanted it, then understood her answer when she hadn't been able to verbalize it. There would be nights when she wanted it soft and sweet, all about sensation and indulgence, and he'd give that to her, too. She was beginning to think there was little in this world he wouldn't give her if she had the presence of mind to ask.

Behind her, as though sensing the path her thoughts had taken, Spike released a low, rumbling purr and tightened the hold he had on her. Then his hand began to wander, skating up her stomach until he had a breast cupped against his palm.

"Slayer," he murmured into her hair before flicking his tongue around her earlobe. "Mmm. Have I told you how much I love it when you stay over? Best bloody way to wake up."

She liked to think she would have said something had he not chosen that moment to thrust his hips against her so she could feel

just how much he meant that. But he did thrust, and she felt him, hard and insistent against her ass, even with the denim that separated them. The need that had begun to fester skyrocketed on impact, soaking her panties and bringing every inch of her to life.

She hadn't gotten to see him after he'd found her at the Bronze. Hadn't had the chance to satisfy the questions regarding his anatomy she hadn't wanted to admit she'd had. If he had the length and girth to back up several years' worth of tease and innuendo... Though, she supposed that wasn't true. Seeing wasn't necessarily believing when she'd had him inside of her and knew firsthand just how large he was. But seeing was still *something* and she wanted to see.

Wanted to do more than see, if she were being honest.

But the opportunity was gone before she could think about seizing it. One second, Spike was peppering her neck with kisses, rolling his hips and teasing her nipple through her shirt—the next he froze, and she knew he remembered.

"Bugger," he muttered, dropping his hand and rolling onto his back. She wasn't prepared for how cold she felt at his absence. "Sorry for that. Takes me a mo' to wake up properly. Won't happen again."

She nearly sobbed in frustration, pressing her thighs together. "I... didn't mind," she managed, hoping she didn't sound as pathetic as she felt.

He didn't reply at first. Didn't need to. He was a vampire, after all. He could probably smell just how little she'd minded being groped. A different Spike, a different situation, she could hear what he'd say about that. All the tease and push and shove until she had no choice but to punch him or kiss his infuriating lips off. The idea that she'd ever be in a bed with Spike and he'd be the one to pull the brakes would have seemed impossible just seventy-two hours ago. Now it was her reality, and she didn't like it.

"Spot of good news for the bloke back in your world, I expect," Spike replied at last. The mattress dipped and whined with movement, and she felt, rather than saw, him sitting up so his back was pressed against the headrest. "If he's been hungry for you as long as I wager he has, he'll be chuffed to hear you're ready to put yourself on the menu."

Her heart did a little jig. Buffy twisted so she could see him, did her

best not to react to finding him sans shirt—she'd known he wasn't wearing one but the visual was a bit more than her sleepy-and-now-horny brain could handle—and focused instead on his words. "What?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Tellin' me you're not?"

"You think I'm gonna go back to my world and...what, start boinking Spike?"

"Any reason why you shouldn't? Doubt you got a steady fella over there if you were so quick to jump on my cock the other night and still act high-and-mighty about my Slayer's regard for her wedding vows."

Heat rose to her cheeks. Spike, since the whole love declaration thing and especially since she'd come back from the dead, had been a bit more subdued around her. There was a strong undercurrent of want and desire, of course, but he'd stopped being so painfully blunt about things. Stopped molding words into weapons, intentionally or unintentionally. The difference hadn't been obvious to her until right now, with Spike staring at her the way he was. Not saying things she wanted to hear or things that would endear him to her in some way—treating her the way he had before he'd loved her, or at least before he'd known it.

"It's wrong," she said, the words flat in a rehearsed sort of way even she could hear.

"Is it?"

"You don't have a soul."

"Yeah, 'cause souls do so much bloody good." He rolled his eyes and reached over to the stand he had propped on his side of the bed. The next second, a lighter flicked and the scent of cigarettes filled the air. "Mean to tell me the reason that poor sod on your side's had nothin' but his hand since losin' his heart to you is because you're fixed on a standard bloody Angel set? Fuck, why don't you just stake the bastard? It'd be kinder."

"That's not fair," she said, also sitting up now, letting the sheet pool around her hips. She hadn't undressed last night when they'd come in, so she was wearing the clothes he'd seen her in the day before, but still somehow managed to feel exposed. Maybe it was the conversation. "And how can you say that? When Angel lost his soul, he made your life miserable too."

"Yeah, and before that we were best bloody chums." Spike snick-

ered and took a puff off his cigarette. "Pillock's had his sodding soul for three years now and each day has been torture."

"Because you're in love with me. I mean Buffy. And she's married to him."

"You think that's all it is?" he retorted, his eyebrows shooting up. "Got a sight more history with him than you do. Since the moment I clawed outta my bloody grave, he's been mucking things up for me. Fuck, that's what he likes. Throwin' around his weight, tellin' others what to do, bein' the big bloody man. Used to come over here to knock me around 'cause he knew he could."

Buffy pressed her lips together. Spike had alluded to as much the night before when he'd been in storyteller mode but he hadn't come back to it—the idea that Angel would beat him up just because he knew he couldn't hit back. The thought had been uncomfortable for numerous reasons, including the fact that she could easily see it.

"All in the name of a good cause, mind," Spike went on, his tone ironic. "Gather information and the like. Take somethin' off your to-do list. Pretend he was bein' helpful or what all. Truth was he needs to feel powerful and power's cheap when no one's punching back. Same reason he bought the bloody leng, isn't it?"

"The what?"

"The gun, pet. Don't tell me you haven't seen it." He flicked his eyebrows at whatever he saw on her face and nodded. "Way my lady tells it, he gets that thing out every sodding night to give it a good polish. Suppose when power's what gets you off, that's more fulfillin' than beatin' the bishop. Never mind he's never pulled the trigger once. Just knowin' he *can* is all that matters."

Buffy didn't say anything—she had no argument for that. Or anything he was saying, really. The line in her head had been so solid for so long where souls were concerned, having had a front-row seat to what damage a man could do without one. And Spike had been a part of that, too. Before he'd been chipped and even after, he'd found ways to sneak in his evil however he could. Though, at some point the previous year, he'd stopped trying to flaunt his evil and started doing whatever he could to score points with her. The fact that Angel had gone off to Sri Lanka after her death whereas Spike had

stayed to guard the Hellmouth in her absence, protect her sister, really spoke for itself. In this reality, Angel had shipped Dawn off to her father. In her reality, he'd decided to take a vacation rather than stick around and help protect what Buffy had given her life to defend.

If she managed to get back to her reality, could she say for certain that things with her Spike would remain the same? She tried to picture it—snapping back to the moment in the Magic Box, breaking the time loop somehow. Giles and Anya upstairs, going about their day as though nothing remarkable had happened. Giles wouldn't understand the reason Buffy threw herself at him in a hug the second she saw him alive and well. Dawn wouldn't get it, either. And Spike?

Her throat tightened. Back in a world with a Spike who looked at her with open devotion and longing, who gave her the quiet moments she craved and filled all the others? Knowing firsthand that he was the one constant between realities, understood her even when she defied explanation? Then there was the knowledge that, whatever else, she was absolutely capable of loving Spike. Whether or not this world had been pieced together by the wish she'd sent into the universe or had been here all along, the fact remained that this world's Buffy was more than just sleeping with the enemy. If sex were all it was, there would be no reason for Spike to feel guilty for not having realized he was screwing the wrong Buffy.

"I don't know," she said at last, her voice hoarse. "I don't know what'll happen when I see you—him again."

Spike nodded, lifted a shoulder as though to say it didn't matter. The more time she spent with him, the more she noticed him doing things like that. Shrugging or waving off things as inconsequential when they were anything but. She wondered about that, too. That this Spike, who would have his Buffy back if things went well, cared about the fate of another Spike. One whose path would never cross with his, god willing. Or maybe he didn't, and she was seeing things that weren't there. Somehow, though, she didn't think so.

"Wastin' daylight, Slayer," Spike said in that firm way that indicated the previous conversation was over. "Sooner we get to the shop, the sooner we send you home, yeah?"

Buffy blinked, shook her head to clear it. "Wasting daylight? What time is it?"

"Reckon around one, maybe two."

"What?" In her life, she didn't think she'd ever slept past noon. Even recently, when fighting her way out of bed every morning was more of a struggle than her patrols. She threw her legs over the side of the mattress and sprang to her feet. "How in the world did we sleep so late?"

"Late? Mite early for yours truly," Spike replied, sounding amused now.

"Well, it's super late for me." Buffy fluffed out her hair and straightened her clothing. She needed a shower—a consideration she hadn't made when her feet had pointed her in the direction of Spike's crypt last night. Definitely a plus in the *motel* column. If she decided not to return home tonight, it might be better for both their sakes to book a room.

Though as soon as she had the thought, the rest of her started rebelling. She decided not to examine that too closely.

"Do you have a place where I can splash some water on my face?" Buffy asked.

Spike huffed but didn't respond, just gestured with his head for her to follow him, which she did. He took her down a length of underground she hadn't noticed before, around a corner, then to a little alcove that looked like it didn't belong. Because it didn't.

It took her a moment to understand what she was seeing. A stretch of bathroom tile had been laid across the ground, encased by sliding doors that apparently fit right inside the walls. There was a mirror hanging above what was unmistakably a sink, situated beside another shelf like the one upstairs, one filled with various Buffy-approved toiletries and a couple of fluffy towels.

"Privy's here," Spike said, directing her gaze to a smaller alcove, one fitted with a toilet and one of her mother's lamps. "Do what you need. I'll grab some nosh so we can get you fed before we leave."

"I... How is this... Spike, how did you do this?"

"Do what?"

"This is...*insane.* You have a fully functional bathroom down here?"

"Yeah..." He looked confused. "Got tired of the Slayer needin' to take off early so she could wash up or what all. Nights she gets to spend with me, which aren't many, I want her here as long as she can stay."

"So you hijacked a Bed, Bath, and Beyond? How does this even work?"

"Know a few blokes who know other blokes who are bloody pathetic card players." Spike offered another one of those *it's no big deal* shrugs. "And Harris pitched in, too."

"What? *Xander*? I thought no one knew—"

"Didn't know it was for you. Don't be daft. Just threatened to break in and use his shower whenever I fancied. Fed him some rot about havin' gotten used to hot water when we were bunkmates and how I might just let myself in sometime when he was at work." At that, he grinned. "Also mighta said somethin' about hopin' his sex-obsessed girl wasn't around then. Show her a thing or two about what she was missin' having settled for a human. He caught her gawkin' at me when I had my shirt off enough times for that one to stick."

Buffy crossed her arms, not sure why the idea of Spike hitting on Anya made her stomach twist. "So...you have hot water."

"Not much you can't do when you set your mind to it, Slayer. Pipes are connected all over, aren't they? All goes somewhere. And I've been in the habit of providin' for my lady for over a century now. That doesn't switch off just because the woman I love comes with a pulse." Now he was rubbing the back of his head as though embarrassed. "Well, go on and wash up or whatever you fancy."

And without another word, he turned on his heel and disappeared back down the tunnel, leaving her staring at the impossible set-up. Last night, she'd marveled at the way he had the upstairs decorated, fixed with things that would make a crypt feel like something other than a crypt. Her mother's things, and Buffy's too, along with the shelf-full of her favorite foods—all the things she'd need if she wanted to stay here long term. That he might have a bathroom, complete with a shower with hot water, was one of those possibilities that had never crossed her mind. It had just been ludicrous.

For the second time in as many hours, Buffy found herself thinking

about the first thing Angel had ever said on the subject of Spike—that once he set his mind on something, he didn't stop. Never stopped. She didn't know why her mind kept taking her back there, except perhaps that it had always seemed strange to her that Spike *had* stopped at some point. Stopped trying to get the chip out, stopped scheming with Big Bads, stopped being evil in the ways that mattered and dedicated himself to...what? Loving her?

She shivered and rubbed her arms, then moved forward and started undressing. It felt strange, getting naked in a tunnel, but not as strange as it should. While she'd only intended to wash her face and maybe her underarms, the prospect of a full shower was something that she found her body very much wanted. And, she had to admit, she was curious about how well all the plumbing worked. If they managed to find the paw at the Magic Box, odds were good she'd never get another chance, so when in Rome.

Buffy had just stripped off her bra when the sound of approaching footsteps reached her ears, and without thinking, she whirled around in time to flash Spike as he rounded the corner.

"Thought you might want this," he said, holding up the suitcase and not reacting at all to her nudity. "Unless you aim to walk back in the altogether."

"Spike!" Buffy threw an arm over her breasts and splayed her other hand over her nether regions. "A little warning, maybe?"

He blinked at her as though only just then realizing she wasn't dressed. Then a look that was so thoroughly *Spike* crossed his face that she had both the urge to punch him and sag with relief. This Spike—one who smirked—was one she knew. Like the night before, catching glimpses of him went a long way in reassuring her that he was the same guy, just with softer edges. Or maybe not even that. He was used to not being on his very best behavior around her, not trying too hard to catch her attention or make himself look better than he was.

This might be the most honest Spike she'd ever been with.

"Slayer," he said, his voice rumbling with amusement, "nothin' I haven't seen, stroked, or licked many, many times. Got no bloody secrets from me."

"It's different."

"Uh huh. And where was all this virtue night before last when I was eating your juicy cunt?" Still smirking, he strode forward and placed her suitcase beside the sink. "Been inside you too, in two places. Can still see my fang marks. No need to be modest on my account."

Maybe not to him, but Buffy wasn't accustomed to parading around him naked. It spoke of vulnerability, intimacy, that felt awkward on her shoulders. But there wasn't a good way to say that—at least not one that came to mind just then—so she didn't bother trying, just gave a sort of half-shrug and hoped that spoke for all the things she couldn't.

He saw it, too. She watched him see it and understand it, as well as the moment when he decided he wouldn't pursue the matter. Instead, he offered a short nod, brought his hands up and backtracked toward the opening of the alcove.

Buffy released a deep breath and dropped her shoulders, feeling a combination of things she'd rather not. But there wasn't any time to linger. If all went well, she'd be home before her mind dragged her back to this place, and with a Spike who wasn't as much of an enigma to her as this one was.

"You might've been right."

"Gonna have to be a sight more specific there, ducks. I'm right about a fair number of things."

Buffy resisted the urge to roll her eyes, half a dozen examples to the contrary immediately springing to mind. Examples she wasn't at liberty to use because she had no history with this particular version of Spike. "Angel," she said, sidestepping a rather large puddle of yuck. The sewers were not her preferred method of travel, but, as Spike said, friendlier to him than the alternative. Plus, he knew a direct way into the basement of the Magic Box, and since they wanted everything set to rights sooner rather than later, it made more sense for them to avoid situations where she might be spotted by someone taking a daytime stroll with the resident undead.

They'd set off from the crypt after a rather tense breakfast. Well, tense on her end, at least, battling thoughts and feelings she shouldn't

have. Spike had seemed rather unbothered by everything that had happened since they'd woken up, from the impromptu sleep groping to catching her naked and ready to hop into the shower. He'd had a bowl of shredded wheat ready for her when she'd climbed her way back upstairs, two-percent milk and everything, along with a couple of well-buttered pieces of toast. Apparently, she'd missed that he had a toaster among his other kitchen amenities.

She'd eaten without comment, and he'd thrown back a couple of glasses' worth of blood, and it had felt almost domestic. Sitting there in the crypt, eating one of her staple breakfasts as Spike puttered around, seemingly unaffected by her presence.

Not unaffected, though. Accustomed. Just as he was with walking in on her before she bathed. Hadn't batted an eye.

That bothered her. Not that she wanted to be ogled by Spike—any Spike—but since discovering he was in love with her, Buffy had held what was probably a way-too-pompous view on how he would react if he ever did see her naked. Yes, she had plenty of self-doubt about her physical appeal...but she also didn't. There were two parts to her thinking—the one nurtured by years of comparing herself unfavorably to girls she thought were prettier or sexier than she was, and the one that knew she was attractive and had a body that wouldn't quit. Literally. Not even death could stop it. So, on some level, she had expected Spike to react with something closer to reverence if ever allowed close enough. That he hadn't even leered at her suggestively made her feel empty. And *that* made her feel shallow.

"Slayer?" Spike nudged her with his shoulder. "Gonna just tease or were you plannin' on goin' somewhere with that?"

Buffy blinked hard and shook her head, forcing her thoughts back to the present. What had she been saying? Oh, right. "You might've been right about Angel."

"Oh, so you're gonna talk about it, then?"

"About what?"

"You came back to me in a right hurry. Wager the big oaf said somethin' to set you off."

"Well, I...I don't know what I was trying to do when I got there. I just...wanted to talk about it."

"It being...?"

"Everything you told me."

Spike's eyebrows shot skyward.

"Not *all* of it," she rushed to clarify. "I just wanted to try to talk, now that I had the full story. I think I wanted to prove you were wrong about him—or my Angel. That they're different."

He nodded, a muscle in his cheek ticking. Still, he didn't look at her, kept his gaze fixed on the stretch of sewer ahead of them. "Yeah?"

"He doesn't know anything about us. Or you and Buffy. I didn't tell him anything, at least."

"Small bloody favor."

"But I did try to have a conversation with him and...well, I can't remember how we got there, but I asked him why he'd come back at all and he told me it was because I was the person he gave up being *someone* for and he felt... I dunno, obligated. Or that he should be with me if I was alive, regardless of what he wanted."

At that, Spike *did* look at her, his eyes wide with surprise. "Yeah? Didn't reckon he'd ever admit it."

"That's the thing—he wants me to." Buffy rubbed her palms along her hips. "He wants Buffy to 'fess up that the entire thing was a mistake from the start and admit she doesn't love him anymore and hasn't for a while. He *also* decided to tell me that it might've been my fault I died because he didn't have his vampire strength to help stop Glory."

Spike snickered and shook his head, like any of this was amusing. "Yeah, that's Angel for you. Thinks the sodding universe revolves around him. Good on you, though. Dunno if I could've kept my mouth shut if I knew he hadn't been any more help to me without a pulse than he was with one. Still died, didn't you?"

"Yeah." And Angel hadn't been there. He hadn't even warned her. That was hard to swallow. "He pretty much told me that he hates being human because it makes it impossible for him to be in my world."

"Bollocks. Scoobs manage just fine, don't they?"

Well, yes, but that didn't sound right. Buffy paused, tugged on his arm to bring him to a stop. "I said the same thing yesterday, about how

Xander is just a regular guy but he's in my world, and you said it was different. Now it's not?"

He rolled his eyes. "Fuck, Slayer, we really have to do this now?"

"Do what?"

"We've had this talk before, you and me. Or not you but *my* Buffy. Answer's the same."

"Answer to what?"

"If it was just Angel or had somethin' to do with you."

Her heart clenched and she didn't know why. "With me?"

"Told you that you need some monster in your man more than once. You've asked me what mighta happened if I stumbled across a bloody Mohra demon like your dearly devoted husband." He let out a breath. "*Dunno's* the honest answer. Lot to figure, isn't there? How I'd sit with a soul, assumin' it was a package deal. One thing I'm sure of, though. You."

"Me?" Buffy echoed, still trying to wrap her mind around the idea of Spike with a soul. Wondering how that would look—how different he'd be. The fact that she couldn't see any dramatic change just in considering the prospect had her a little unnerved. Maybe a bit politer, less with the hair bleach...but in terms of evilness?

"Wouldn't be sour because I had my destiny yanked from me," Spike continued as though he hadn't just upended her world. "Don't *want* to be human, I can tell you that much, but if it happened and I had to stay that way, only know I'd still be yours."

The certainty in his voice unnerved her even more. "H-how do you know?"

"'Cause I'm not him," he said. "Wasn't as a human tosser, either. Always been a bit more of a romantic, I suppose." Spike sucked in his cheeks and looked away. "Would always wanna be in the thick of it, too. Met me a few decent demon hunters in my day. It'd be a step down, but I'd adjust, so long as it meant keeping you."

A horrible, familiar sting met her eyes, her heart twisting all over again. "He would've said so too." Perhaps he had—assuming that Angel's transformation to human and decision to stay that way was the point of divergence between their worlds. If they'd had a day together before he'd gotten cold feet and taken it back. At one point, she had

been confident that Angel would have given anything to stay in her life. Only apparently he hadn't.

"Yeah, well, difference is I actually mean what I say," Spike said, nodding at the untrekked tunnel ahead of them to indicate they should start moving again. "Only people I ever needed to prove myself to were the people I loved. Didn't give a right damn about the rest of them."

Buffy didn't say anything for a beat, just fell into pace beside him once more. "You can't know, though," she said at last. "What you'd do. How you'd react. A soul could change everything."

He huffed a little as though amused. "Tellin' you, love, got your thinkin' all twisted around where that's concerned."

"You're saying you're not that different than you were before?"

This time he didn't reply at all, just kept his gaze fixed dead ahead, his jaw tight. And she wondered, as she never had before, exactly what sort of man he had been before he'd been turned. He'd told her very little once upon a time, glossing over the finer points to focus on how grateful he'd been to become a vampire. He'd also said something about society's rules, being released from those shackles. At the time, she hadn't been interested enough to ask what he meant by that—what rules he was done with, and had he *ever* played by any rules at all. He'd told her he'd *always* been bad, after all. If that were true, why would becoming a vampire make such a dramatic difference?

There was more in what he hadn't told her, she realized. A lot more.

And that he didn't see much changing in terms of the way he felt about her meant something, too.

She just didn't know if she was brave enough to ask.

11

HOPE IS A BASTARD. HOPE IS A LIAR, A CHEAT AND A TEASE

She gave up before he did. Normal, she supposed. Spike hadn't had the privilege of searching yet—the nooks and crannies were still new to him, still full of promise. If he felt that sinking in his stomach, the one that came with the voice that whispered it was no good, he didn't let it show. He was a man determined.

The first time she suggested quitting for the day, he'd acted like he hadn't heard her, just shoved his way through more of the Magic Box's inventory and tackled another pile. The second time she'd suggested it, he'd paused long enough to shoot her a mutinous look before shoving the rolling shelf aside and moving to the next. The third time, he'd actually snarled.

"Decided you aim to stay, then?"

"What?"

"Look at you. You call yourself the Slayer? Over here, anyone who goes by the name Buffy Summers doesn't give up near as fast." Spike had whipped around then, started going through another shelf. He'd been careful, she'd noticed, not to just upend everything, though she could tell he very much wanted to. Rather, it seemed like he was warring between his desire to get the right Buffy back and the urge to start smashing everything in sight. Or perhaps he had better impulse

control than the Spike she knew back home...except she didn't think it was that, either.

When something mattered to Spike, really mattered, he took the time needed to get it right. Turning over shelves and creating even more of a mess than the one that already existed would do nothing but make the task of finding a monkey paw in an inventory stack even more improbable than it felt at the moment. So, he was being careful, considerate, and other words she would never have associated with Spike prior to right now.

The end result was the same, though. The paw wasn't there.

"You were holdin' it. You made your wishes and you were holdin' the paw."

She nodded, trying to ignore the growing pain in her head. The one that had set up shop right behind her eyes and seemed to pulse every time she blinked. "I was holding it."

"And then what?"

"And then I wasn't holding it anymore, Spike. How many times do you need me to go over this?" She brought her fingers to her temples, squeezing her eyes shut. "It was dark. I was standing here in the dark and I kinda felt my way toward the door. It wasn't until I got up the stairs that I realized I didn't have it anymore. I thought I'd dropped it. I decided not to look then because I had no idea what was waiting for me outside and I didn't trust I'd be able to find my way back to it quickly and I wanted to get out of here to see what my wishes had brought me and because I'd already been down here reenacting *Groundhog Day* for I don't *know* how long. Believe me, if I could go back and kick my own ass, I would. Preferably before I used the damn thing in the first place."

Her rant was met with silence—a thick sort of silence, one filled-to-bursting. He would start screaming at her any second, she was sure, and then maybe her head would just cave in on itself and she wouldn't have to worry about paws or wishes or alternate realities anymore. Spike's increasing desperation was a tangible thing. She would swear it had its own taste and texture because it was starting to overpower her senses.

"Musta not been here, then."

Buffy whipped her head up and immediately wished she hadn't for how the room spun. "Huh?"

"Not somethin' you'd let go of, Slayer." He sounded certain, which was more than she could say for herself. "'Specially in a situation like this, yeah? Brave new world and all. Your survival depends on you *not* losin' your grip, be it on weapons or powerful bits of mojo. One of the reasons the only beastie that was ever bad enough to take you down was you. Problem's not that you lost it—it's that it wasn't ever here to begin with."

She didn't realize she was holding her breath until her lungs burned, and she exhaled slowly. The pain in her head seemed to seep out along with the tension she released. Not that the prospect of the paw not being here was necessarily a happy one—on the contrary, it was rather terrifying—but if it *wasn't* here, that at least meant that she *hadn't* lost it. She might have screwed up more epically than anyone else had ever screwed up in the history of forever, but she hadn't lost the damn paw.

"Rupert is still kickin' over on your side," Spike said, his brow furrowed. "So, he arrives safe and sound after your mates work their mojo. He musta gotten it after he landed."

"That's assuming everything went the same over there as it did here."

He met her gaze, his eyebrows arched. "Sayin' you think it didn't? Thought everythin' else matched up pretty well, yeah?"

"Then why didn't my Giles die in a plane crash?"

"I dunno, love. Could all come down to when he heard the news that you were back among the living. Maybe he didn't catch the same flight."

"Why wouldn't he have caught the same flight, though?"

"Well, way you tell it, you wandered around town for a bit thinkin' you were in Hell." At that, something in Spike's eyes changed, like he heard the words as he said them, or felt their impact. The lines of his face softened as well—all of him seemed to—and for a moment, he looked more like the Spike she knew. The one who had been her safe harbor since that first horrible night, and her chest twisted.

She missed him. She missed *Spike*. The one who loved her without

reservation—who was there for her no matter what. This Spike... He'd said he loved her just by virtue of her being Buffy, but she wasn't what he wanted, and he'd made that very clear. She wasn't *welcome* in his world. She was a problem to solve and send packing.

The Spike who looked at her like she was the answer to every question that had ever been asked—she wanted that Spike back.

God, what did that mean?

Spike cleared his throat and directed his gaze to the floor, shifting his weight from one foot to the next. "Didn't mean to sound like that, love," he said. "Someone shoulda been there for you. *I* shoulda been there for you—your version of me, at least. From the start."

Buffy blinked, her sinuses burning, and crossed her arms. "You were," she said, drawn back to the way he'd looked at her when she'd walked down the stairs. The way he'd made her feel alive then, and how she'd spent every moment since in pursuit of feeling that again. "He was, I mean. He didn't know what was going on. He was trying to protect Dawn and Dawn... I dunno, ran off because she realized that I was alive somewhere. But he started trying to take care of me the second he realized what was going on. Then my friends barged in and chased him off."

Something else flashed across his face. "That's it, then," he said. "Buffy stayed with me that first night. She didn't go see her mates until after. Bloody good thing, too. Had a rough night. Some beastie—"

"The spell made a monster."

He nodded. "Sussed out that it was somethin' happenin' to her, and we couldn't fight it, so we had to tell the others that she was back. Witches did some hocus pocus, my lady went into action and down went the beastie. Not sure how long after they called your watcher but coulda been enough. Seems likely, though, that he got lucky where you come from. Took a different flight, or what all."

But that would mean there had been a plane crash in her world, which *didn't* seem likely. She would have known. It would've been in the paper or on the news, right?

Though how much attention had she given the news as of late? Buffy frowned, furrowing her brow. The pain behind her eyes was pulsing again, harder than before. In truth, just getting from one

moment to the next had consumed all her energy; there hadn't been room for much in her head beyond the things she needed to keep there in terms of her own survival. Survival itself being something she wasn't sure she wanted but she felt obligated to work toward that end regardless.

It was possible she had missed something about a plane crash. Perhaps Giles had been the only casualty with ties to Sunnydale, which would have relegated it to a tragedy that had happened Somewhere Else and therefore, while sad, was outside her purview.

"So, he got it while he was here," Buffy muttered. "Not before. Or maybe he brought it with him." Though that didn't make sense, either. Learn that your surrogate daughter is once again among the living and book a quick flight to California, but be sure to bring along a dark object with the intent to destroy it when he had a free moment? No, more likely the monkey's paw had been an acquisition made after he'd landed. "The lawyers you mentioned think Giles had it. Why else would I be looking for it here?"

Spike nodded, breathed out again, and settled his hands on his hips in a pose she'd seen a thousand times, the lapels of his duster bunching back to reveal his waistline. "Might be time, love."

"Time for what?"

"To do what you—the other you—has been avoidin'." He met her gaze. "Sit down with Anyanka."

"Anya as in my best friend's wife who hates my guts because I can't sell her a shop I don't technically own."

"Wife? They tie the knot, then? Thought she was plannin' a big showy production of the nuptials. Don't tell me Harris convinced her to rush off to Vegas."

Buffy's frown deepened. "I thought they were married. Anya mentioned something the other night about being newlyweds and that's the reason why they wouldn't have wanted to be Dawn's guardians, if Angel had given them the choice."

"Engaged is all, last I heard," Spike said. "Announced it at the Watcher's graveside. Thought it'd perk everyone right up. Apparently, they'd been sittin' on it since the night you..."

"Oh."

Spike edged toward her, now looking bemused. "What's the matter, Slayer?"

"I just..." She shook her head to clear it, then wished she hadn't when it gave a defiant throb. "Them being married was another thing that was different here."

"Yeah..."

He was confused, and she couldn't blame him. It wasn't his world being upended, after all. At least not more so than it already had been. But there was another gap potentially closed, making the things that separated her reality from the one she had landed inside even sparser than they had been before. If it was possible that a plane *not* carrying Giles had gone down in her world, then it was just as possible that Xander and Anya *were* engaged and just hadn't gotten around to sharing the news.

Then but for a single action she hadn't taken, this *would* be her life.

Those were thoughts for another time.

"Anya won't want to see me," Buffy said, forcing herself forward. "She was here yesterday when I got here and... Well, there were words."

"She was here? Thought you—*Buffy*—took her key."

"There were two, apparently. One to the front and one to the back. She..." Buffy's eyes went wide and she turned to him sharply. "A box. She had a box. She was taking things from the back."

Spike let out a low snarl. "And you let her?" he demanded, launching into motion. In a flash, he was stomping up the stairs, having managed to practically fly there without knocking anything over. "Bloody hell, Slayer..."

"Hey!" With not nearly the speed or grace, Buffy negotiated her way through the shelves they'd spent the last few hours combing through, managing to bump both knees and elbows into unforgiving surfaces in her hurry. Damn vampires. "What was I supposed to do?"

"Not let her make off with what's yours."

"She said it wasn't—"

"Are you thick?" He was well and fuming now, his jaw in full clench-mode, his nostrils flared. "Might notta known what my Slayer was

lookin' for, but you knew she was lookin' for somethin'. Or did that not matter at all to you?"

"Well, why the hell weren't you here?" Buffy fired back, her face hot. "If finding the paw was so dire, then why has it been *just* Buffy doing the looking? Or is getting Dawn back not as important to you as you—"

"Don't you bloody dare," Spike said, and she stopped short at the steel in his voice. The sort that screamed its reminder that he was a predator and defied her to forget it again. "She told me not to come so I didn't."

"Why in the world would she tell—"

But the answer coming to her just as fast. Of course, Spike couldn't help. The more she was seen with him, the better the chance of their affair becoming public knowledge. And that was something this world's Buffy couldn't risk right now. If Buffy understood nothing else, she understood *that*. Regardless of the way things had gone differently here, more remained the same. Buffy was navigating life back from the dead, dogged by something worse than depression, even if she had someone she loved on her side. Just getting from one breath to the next took all her focus. Anything more was asking for a breakdown.

"You don't do what you're told, Spike," Buffy said, softer. "At least not the Spike I know."

"Not always. But when it matters? When it's you?" He stared at her a moment longer before huffing and shaking his head. "Not sure what it takes to convince you, but I damn well pity the bloke who gets to try."

With that, he whirled around and stomped into the shop proper, leaving her feeling a combination of hurt and guilt that she didn't have the capacity to handle. Maybe he was right. Letting Anya leave yesterday with a box of things had seemed the easiest way to avoid a confrontation—and if she were being honest, she hadn't given much thought to what the other Buffy was looking for. All she'd known was that the last time she'd seen the monkey's paw, she'd been in the basement, not in the training room.

It wasn't quite night when they stepped outside, but close enough that, with the aid of overhead cloud coverage, Spike didn't need to

worry about making a mad dash anywhere. He didn't say a word to her as she locked up the shop, nor as he stalked the familiar path to Xander's apartment. She thought about asking why they weren't taking the sewers but thought the better of it. Spike rarely got so angry that he *didn't* run his mouth, and she didn't really feel like being on the losing side of an argument at the moment. She also didn't feel like apologizing—seemed that was all she'd done for the last twelve hours and she'd had her fill.

Like any of this had been her plan.

When they were outside Xander's place, however, something did occur to her—something that couldn't wait.

"What are we going to tell them?"

Spike snorted, and that was the only indication he gave that he'd heard her before he hammered his fist on the door.

"Seriously, Spike, won't they be suspicious if you're with me? Or are we such good friends that—"

The door opened and she cut herself off before her stupid mouth got her into more trouble. Because it wasn't Anya who opened the door—it was Xander. From the look of things—the safety vest and the windblown state of his hair—he'd just gotten home. "Oh," he said with mild surprise. "Buffy. Spike. Did we have plans?"

"Need to talk to the little lady," Spike said, pushing his way inside without awaiting an invite. "Slayer's got herself in a jam."

If Xander was at all put out that the resident undead had just helped himself into his apartment, he didn't let it show. Didn't do much of anything aside from blink and turn his attention to Buffy, eyes now round with concern. "How can we help?"

"For starters," Spike called, "that's not our Buffy. Anyanka!"

Buffy opened her mouth to protest, but the damage had been done. Xander stepped back, the concern in his gaze shifting to suspicion. It was a testament to how different the group dynamic was here, how quickly he believed it. In her world, Xander would roll his eyes and smart off about Spike being evil or out of his head or both. In this world, he believed. Simple as that.

"I'm still Buffy, Xan," she said hurriedly. "Just...like he said—err,

shouted—not your Buffy. And not exactly the way I would have told you."

Xander didn't say anything, just eyeballed her up and down as though searching for scales or a tail or something. Then he sighed, rolled his shoulders back, and motioned for her to come inside. "I had plans, you know," he said. "It's Must-See-TV Thursday and Niles and Daphne *finally* got together. Eight seasons of pining paying off in increments each week."

Buffy offered a wan smile as she stepped over the threshold. "I'm sorry. TV night is an important night."

"Not as important as finding out how you're not our Buffy, granted, but up there. I'll have Anya record it. We've never watched the *Seinfeld* finale more than once, anyway."

The sound of raised voices cut off whatever lame reply Buffy had been about to come up with. She contorted her face into what she hoped was a suitable forgive-me expression, then followed Xander to the living room where Anya and Spike looked a second away from needing a referee called in.

"—wasn't yours and you bloody well know it, so fork it over."

"I invested my blood and sweat in that shop!" Anya shot back, her skin bright red and her eyes daggered. "Literal, bad-smelling sweat. She can't have everything that was in there! It was *mine* too!"

"She's not doin' anythin' with it, you miserable bint."

"Exactly! It's sitting there all unsold and—"

"Anya!" Xander bellowed, cupping his mouth for effect. "We have a problem."

Spike winced and jerked away, muttering something about pulsers and their having no respect for his sensitive hearing. But the tactic had worked—the arguing came to an end. Though now he and Anya had turned their glares on Buffy, which she did not appreciate, even if she deserved it.

Apparently, she'd used up the last of her goodwill at the shop, where Spike was concerned. All of that warmth, residual or borrowed, had leaked away. And that hurt, too, even if it shouldn't.

But this was his world—his life she'd messed up. For everything he'd done since she'd told him the truth, she had to try.

"Anya," Buffy said, fighting for calm and doing her best to ignore the burn of Spike's unwavering attention. "I need to know if a monkey's paw was in the stuff you took home from the shop yesterday."

"A monkey's paw? Why on earth would I take a monkey's paw?"

"Oh, I dunno," Spike drawled, his voice shaking. All of him shaking, actually, like he was fighting to keep from flying into a rage. "Simple solution to all your woes, innit? Make a wish, get yourself a shop. That's what you vengeance demon types do, right? Muck with magic?"

Anya gaped at him, then smacked his shoulder hard enough that the resulting *crack* made Buffy wince.

"Anya!" Xander stumbled forward. "Really! With the hitting!"

But Anya didn't answer him, too busy glaring stakes at Spike. "Do you take me for an idiot, you oversized mosquito?" she spat. "*Eleven hundred years* spent granting wishes and doling out vengeance, and you accuse *me* of being stupid enough to use a monkey's paw?" Now she did turn to Xander, her eyes flashing. "He's insulting me, Xander. Make him leave."

Xander opened his mouth, but Buffy nudged him before he could say anything. She could see, in slow motion, what was coming next. Could already feel her face burning with a combination of shame and humiliation, and her heart had taken to thumping at a breakneck speed. The way this Anya looked at her now was already hard to stomach, but that was Buffy's problem, not Spike's. And if there was a chance that Anya knew anything about the monkey's paw, Buffy had to take it.

"It was me," she blurted before she could lose her nerve. "I found the monkey's paw and I used it. I made three wishes with it at the Magic Box. And I ended up here."

The silence that met this proclamation was the screaming sort.

"You used a monkey's paw," Anya said in a flat tone. "Are you stupid?"

"Let's just go with yes."

"What the hell is a monkey's paw?" Xander asked, whirling to Buffy. "I guess it has to do with you not being our Buffy."

"It's a powerful bit of dark magic, is what it is," Anya said, unblinking. "It grants wishes at a horrible price."

"Bloke called Jacobs wrote about it," Spike offered. He'd moved to lean against the wall, his lighter in hand but nothing else. He flicked the cap back and forth, watching its progress with fixed intensity. Like looking up might cost him something. "Bloody cautionary tale they oughta have taught you Yanks in school."

Buffy nodded, waited to see if Spike would look at her. He didn't. "I found it at the Magic Box when I was working there with you and Giles," she said, forcing her gaze back to Anya. "I was looking for a mummy hand."

Anya snorted, crossing her arms. "And you mistook a paw for a hand? You *are* stupid."

"Giles?" Xander looked lost again. "But he—"

"She means in her world, Xander. The one she came from."

"He's still alive there?"

Again, Buffy nodded. "He...he was. He came back after I was resurrected. There wasn't a plane crash. Or...not one that I remember, anyway."

"That means the crash was most likely a wish consequence." Anya stepped forward. That she'd landed on this conclusion without effort was only somewhat jarring. Anya *would* understand all of this, in ways Buffy never could, which somehow made everything worse. "How long have you been here pretending to be our Buffy?" the former demon asked.

She swallowed, glanced to Xander, then to Spike, who was still studying his lighter, before meeting Anya's gaze again. "Two days. I was at the Magic Box. Then I went home and...Angel was there. I tried going to Giles's, but... I didn't know. I found out that night at the Bronze."

Xander edged away from her like she was a dangerous animal he was struggling not to spook, then turned to Anya. "What did you mean, the crash was a consequence?"

"If Giles is alive in her world, then she wished something that changed that here."

He paled. Swallowed. "She's the reason Giles is dead?"

"Most likely. That depends on the wishes," Anya said without so much as a flinch. "What were they?"

Buffy drew her lower lip between her teeth, looking again to Spike. Why, she didn't know. Just had become a habit at some point, looking to Spike. Trusting that he could, if nothing else, provide a reprieve from the noise and the pain that her life had been ever since she'd punched her way out of her coffin. But even though he was no longer studying his lighter, his eyes made it clear that Spike had no interest in providing her a soft landing. Not this one, anyway.

What a difference a day made. Just a single day. Though she knew she'd made the right choice, telling him the truth, that she'd been right in what it would cost her burned more than it should. The soft looks, the gentle touches, the quiet reassurance—all gone. She was an imposter walking around in some other girl's skin and no matter that, confusing as it was, she also *was* the other girl, Spike wasn't about to give her an inch.

So, she exhaled slowly. "Can we sit down?"

Xander nodded and gestured at the kitchen table. "Pull up a chair. Might as well get comfy. Should we order a pizza?" His grin, which had been uneasy to begin with, died the second he met his fiancée's gaze. "Or...not."

Just as well. Buffy wasn't hungry, and there was a lot to go over. More than she felt she had license to, given she intended to leave the consequences to another Buffy, but the story required context to be understood, and she wasn't about to skimp out on it, no matter the fallout.

So, she sat and started to talk. There was no sense leaving anything out, either for her or this world's Buffy, given that Spike knew everything. If he had any reservations about her spilling all of Buffy's secrets, he didn't show it. Instead, he sat and stared at her as she detailed the scene that had greeted her when she'd climbed out of her coffin. How she'd stumbled through a town turned into a demon warzone, convinced she was in Hell. It had been somewhat similar here, from what Spike had said, with a few notable differences. The fact that there had been a Buffybot, which Buffy hadn't contextualized but to say that the guy who'd made the creepy sex doll had also made

one in Buffy's likeness that they'd molded into a weapon. She went through her second climb up the tower, how Dawn had found her as she'd been contemplating the pavement below, reliving the moment right before she'd jumped, chasing it down to wrestle it into submission, because things had been so clear then. She'd understood, she'd gotten it. Death was her gift because it would give her sister, the world itself, life.

She'd talked more about her feelings, that hollowness, in the day she'd been here than she'd let herself think about it in all the days leading up to it. Every moment back home seemed like a dodge, trying to remain a step ahead so it didn't catch her. And as painful as it was, there was catharsis there, too. This wasn't the Xander she'd have to face for the rest of her life, knowing he knew all this. And yes, there was that residual guilt, sharing other Buffy's secrets, but other Buffy could just deal. With all of it.

Which was what she told herself as she heard the words tumble from her lips, as the suspicion and concern on Xander's face melted into something worse—something like recognition, the more she described what being here was like. By the time she'd given a name to the place she'd been, said that it was Heaven, not Hell, and that living through every moment was a challenge a lot like dying itself, he had tears running down his cheeks.

And a small, vindictive part of her thought, *good*.

It was slow, but Xander eventually gave his head a shake before turning to Anya, all but begging her to lie to him with his eyes. "Does this mean our Buffy was in Heaven, too?"

Anya, who seemed somewhat mollified but not nearly as moved, offered a one-shouldered shrug. "There's no way to know."

But there was. Buffy saw it the second before Xander did, in the form of Spike's nonexistent poker face.

"You knew?" he barked, sounding *now* more like the Xander she knew. All indignation and suspicion, aimed at the vampire he hated. "Why? Why would she tell you and not us?"

"She didn't," Buffy blurted before she could stop herself—before, even, she could analyze just what the hell it was she meant by it. A flicker of loyalty to Spike, she supposed. A desire to make things right

with him if no one else. "I...I did. When I got here, I told him. Spike and I are... In my world, he's my boyfriend."

Well, that did it. Xander blinked, dumbfounded. "Your boyfriend?" When she nodded—doing her damnedest not to look at Spike, though feeling his stare as though it were a physical thing—her friend blew out a breath, laughed a little, and shook his head. "I... Well, I didn't see that coming."

"Believe me, neither did I," Buffy replied.

"Does he... Are you happy over there? With him?"

Buffy faltered a bit, searching for words. "Umm, aside from the whole post-Heaven-stress trauma... He makes it easier to be here. And I love him."

It was impossible to miss Spike's flinch, even out of her periphery, and he rose to his feet and stalked off for a moment. Thankfully, neither Xander nor Anya seemed to notice—they were too busy staring at her.

Then Xander looked down and blew her socks off.

"Well...damn, Buff," he said. "What the hell did you have to use the monkey's paw for? You have Giles, Dawn... I mean, I'm still processing the hell out of the Heaven thing—and yes, I did hear how that sounded—and you're with someone you actually love?" He waited until she nodded, forced as it was. "And he loves *you*? What could you possibly need that you weren't getting?"

The old reliables came to mind. Money and security, knowing that Dawn would be cared for, would stay with her. She waited for Xander to ask how Angel fit into this, because she *hadn't* been thinking that far ahead—or at all—when she'd blurted that she and Spike were a thing. But amid that was resentment too, because who the hell did he think he was, asking her that after what he'd done to her? After what he and Anya and Willow and Tara—all of them had done? Having Dawn and Giles and *love* didn't magically make life better. How would they know, if they weren't living with the crushing weight of fear that it would all come apart? The loneliness, the despair, the wondering what she might have done different to stay where she was, if she'd not only been torn out but ejected from Heaven because of some fault of her own. How

Heaven—celestial, holy Heaven—hadn't been strong enough to shut the door on Willow.

"You don't know what it's like," she managed weakly. "Worrying... about Dawn. About what'll happen to her if her grades don't improve. That she'll be taken from me. I just...wanted to know she was safe."

"So, you wished for her to go to your dad?"

"No. I didn't. I absolutely did not. I don't remember how I worded it, but it had nothing to do with my dad. I thought she'd be safe. Stay with me."

"You're an idiot," Anya muttered.

"Don't you think I know that?"

"You picked up an object that you were told was only there to be destroyed, and you used it. And you're here trying to make Xander feel sorry for you when you're the reason Dawn was taken away." She crossed her arms and shot her a defiant look. "What was the next wish? Is it the one that got Giles killed?"

"Anya!" Xander barked.

Buffy flinched but refused to blink. "Yes," she said. "I wished...I wished for financial security. That I wouldn't have to worry about the mortgage or the bills or...or anything. And I came here and Giles is dead and apparently, he left me everything."

Xander was staring at her once more, this time pale and slack-jawed. Like he'd expected, on some level, for her to contradict it, even when all evidence had been to the contrary. That was Xander through and through, though. Unable to believe the worst in her until he had no choice in the matter. It was so familiar that the blow of losing Giles hit her all over again, only harder and worse than before. Like it had taken this moment to make it real.

"My livelihood," Anya said, jolting Buffy's attention back to her. The former demon was staring at the table—staring, then suddenly slammed her hands upon it with a burst of motion and jumped to her feet. "You took *everything* from me."

"That was never the intention," Buffy said, striving for calm. "I didn't know—"

"You didn't know. That's the crux of it. Buffy finds a cursed object

that your Giles bought to destroy, and that isn't clue enough for you to leave well enough alone?"

"I was stuck in a—"

"You were weak!" Anya snapped, slapping the table again. "You had what was clearly a defective mummy hand—"

"Defective? I tried talking to you about it!"

"Did you really? Or were you so focused on the time-loop that you skimped over that part? Defective merchandise is not something I just blow off, and if the mummy hand was active and trying to murder you, then it had been bewitched by someone and therefore useless to me."

Buffy opened her mouth to protest—scream, actually—that of course she had gone to Anya about the homicidal appendage...but the words wouldn't come. She knew she'd mentioned the mummy hand to Giles—Giles was her go-to in those situations, and it was *his* shop, after all—but the more pressing issue had been that she was reliving the same twenty minutes over and over.

No, she had to have mentioned it. The time-loop had seemed tied to the mummy hand, and by extension, the customer. But if Anya was right, and the mummy hand *had* been tampered with, then maybe there had been more at work. The same *more* that had been following her around—just enough *other* to not really stand out in Sunnydale, but more persistent and targeted.

There was the doohickey that had caused the time-warp on campus, which had preceded the nightmare of chauvinistic bullcrap at the construction site. Add it all together and it was like something had been deliberately testing her, putting her through her paces. And if it could make time act all wonky, who was to say it couldn't exercise its influence on people, too?

Maybe it had wanted her to use the monkey paw, whatever *it* was. Though how it could know what she'd wish for was beyond her. Or maybe it didn't matter. From the stories Anya had told, what her targets had wished for had been incidental—it was the mayhem those wishes created that she had relished, particularly when someone got what they deserved.

Was this what she deserved?

Buffy steeled herself and looked to Anya again, forcing everything back. "Is this world even real?"

She wouldn't have thought it possible, but the former demon's eyes went even darker than before. "What?"

"Is this real? Did any of this exist before my wish or did I make it?" She could feel Spike's glare on her before she felt him reenter the room. It took a lot of restraint, but she refrained from turning her head in his direction. "You talked about worlds before. Other worlds. Worlds you created when you were all vengeancy. Ones with...shrimp and without?"

Anya was still for a moment, still seething, clearly not sure where Buffy was going with this but at least she'd stopped yelling for a moment. "That happened, yes. Other worlds were created. Particularly when someone would wish that so-and-so was never born, or something along those lines."

"You *created* those worlds. They didn't exist before the wishes."

"Yes and no." Now she was grinning, and it wasn't a nice grin. Rather frightening, actually, considering the expression she'd worn just a second ago. "You want to know if you're on the hook for this world. The answer is yes. It exists because you wished it."

"So, you and everyone else...didn't exist three days ago?" Now Buffy did look at Spike. Couldn't help it. That would mean that the sordid history he had with this world's Buffy hadn't actually happened. Last night, he'd said it didn't matter whether it was real or not—that being real to him was enough—but Buffy was very much aware of how reality could put theory to shame. If this world's Buffy had actually never existed, then maybe—

"I wasn't finished," Anya said shortly. "This reality couldn't be without you, that is true. But it has also *always* been."

Well, that made the kind of sense that didn't.

"Umm, Ahn?" Xander said, raising his hand and looking more than a little lost. "That... What?"

"Humans think of time as a straight line with fixed points," Anya went on. "But time isn't a straight line. It's a squiggly line that has a bunch of loops and branches and other branches and more loops on top of those branches...forever and ever, indefinitely. Where we land

on that line depends on the choices we make, and, because of demons like me and artifacts like the monkey's paw, the choices others make that shape our reality. Because Buffy wished this world into being, it was. But it always was, because she was always going to wish it."

Buffy was relieved to see Xander appeared no more enlightened than she felt, and she wasn't sure where Anya's explanation left her, exactly. If the world always was, even before she'd known she was going to wish it into existence—that meant everything that had happened here had happened before she'd even seen the monkey's paw. But somehow, inexplicably, also because of it.

Her head started to pound once more.

"So no, Buffy," Anya said. "This is a world you created. With very real people in it—people who suffer the repercussions of your decisions. What you see is what you got because of what you wanted." She paused. "I suppose this means I have been too hard on our Buffy. All along, this was *your* fault, not hers. And now I'll never get to tell her sorry."

"Never?" Spike didn't speak the word so much as bark it, his calm disappearing in a blink. "The hell you mean, never? Why the bugger do you think we're here? We'll find the sodding paw and destroy it. Take it all back."

Xander raised his hand. "Would that...take the world back, though? Like, undo the wish that made this world to begin with? 'Cause if that's the case, I'm gonna vote no."

Anya rolled her eyes. "No, Xander. It wouldn't undo this world. The last wish I worked was undone and the world that came from it still turned. It was where I lost my amulet." She made a seizing motion at her neck, from which hung nothing. "I attempted to go back, remember?"

"I doubt I'll ever be able to forget what Willow looked like as a vampire, no."

"So that's what we do," Spike said, looking between Anya and Xander as though expecting them to rush for the door at any second. "Don't have the sodding paw here, fine. Gotta be somewhere, doesn't it? We find it, destroy it, send this Slayer back to her world and bring our girl home."

The edge to his voice, combined with the urgency in his eyes, was a bit of a giveaway, in Buffy's opinion. A non-smitten Spike wouldn't give a crap which Buffy occupied which universe, and she waited for either Xander or Anya to say something. Neither did.

"Sounds like a plan to me," said Xander before throwing her a smile. It was strained, that smile, but not unkind. "We'll get you back, Buff. The Scooby Gang is—"

"No, we won't," Anya said flatly. "The paw can't be destroyed."

A sick, sour taste flooded Buffy's mouth, her chest lurching so hard the room seemed to go lopsided. "What do you mean? Giles bought it to destroy it. That was the whole reason he had it."

"The monkey's paw is a very powerful magical object. You say it was in a case back in your world?" When Buffy nodded, Anya inclined her head. "Then he hadn't found a way to do it. If you buy something to get it out of circulation, you don't just keep it lying around. You destroy it the second you have it. Most likely he had already tried and discovered it couldn't be done."

"But he *meant* to destroy it. You told me so."

"I can't vouch for what some other version of Anya said in your former world. Maybe she's dumber than I am."

"Rubbish," Spike said, even rougher now. His eyes were practically on fire, a reflecting yellow under the blue like he was struggling to keep hold of his demon. Like he was on the edge of losing control completely. "We'll burn the bloody thing—"

"That won't work."

"How the sodding hell do you know?"

At that, Anya swelled up. "Because granting wishes was my thing, you idiot. Anything out there that could do what I did, I made it my business to know. It was competition, after all, and we had quotas to meet. D'Hoffryn wasn't one to accept excuses. 'Oh, I couldn't close the deal on the miller's daughter. She found a monkey's paw instead.' That's how you got yourself put on probation. Monkeys' paws can't be destroyed by anything other than the Promethean Flame, and that went out more than ten millennia ago."

"The what?" Buffy asked, her head now filling with a dull buzzing,

her skin growing hot and her heart starting to thunder so hard her ribs shook.

No destroying it. There was no destroying the monkey's paw. No going home. No seeing Giles again. No Dawn waiting to give her the full snotty teenager treatment. No normal world with its normal Spike and normal Angel living his normal vampire life in normal LA. The image she'd had, the hope, vanished like so much vapor.

From a distance, she heard Anya answering her question in that same matter-of-fact tone from before. The Promethean Flame—rumored to be the fire brought to humankind from the god Prometheus, the source of all fire as it existed on earth. It had been used for many rituals, as the root of a thousand spells, and, according to legend, could burn through anything. Except it had vanished one night from the temple in which it was tended—a night preceding Anya's birth, so far back that its very existence was up for debate. As far as she knew, as far as she had been told, there was no other power out there that stood a chance of destroying a monkey's paw. The magics that imbued it with its awful power were too strong. History was littered with tales of people who had gotten exactly what they'd wished for, desperate to take it back, and all ended the same. Dead by their own hands when it proved impossible, the true victim to whatever the paw had given. Their blood fueled its power, and so on and so on. Chances were good even now that the Promethean Flame would prove ineffective, as much as the paw had consumed over the eons.

"I'll wish again," Buffy muttered, seizing on the rogue thought and holding it down. "I'll wish to go back. When we find it, I'll wish again."

"So your plan is to create more worlds to ruin?" Anya shot back. "That isn't how the monkey's paw works. You wouldn't go back to your world—you'd be thrown into another one."

"But..." She turned her stinging eyes to Spike, who had gone very still, his mouth open and his face even whiter than usual. He looked like a ghost.

"Face it, you're stuck here," Anya said, and this time there was cruel relish in her voice. "You lost your sister. I lost my shop. Giles is dead. But hey, you got the green and we know that, wherever she is,

Dawn is doing A-okay. Take a good look around. Your wishes came true. May you get with them exactly what you deserve."

Her ears started to ring, shrill and deafening. Buffy stared at Anya, who stared back, her expression shuttered, her eyes cold. Then she looked to Xander, who was gazing at her, dumbstruck.

Then something horrible burst through the silence. Something raw and wounded, the howl of an animal not-yet-dead but watching as the vultures drew nearer. It was Spike, screaming. Screaming and screaming and screaming and the sound wouldn't stop. It ripped at her ears, at the air itself, pushing against it as though to break free and become a tangible thing. Then he was in motion, a blur of leather hell-bent on destruction, yanking the phone right out of the wall, the cord ripping and bits of plaster scattering across the floor. And Anya was screaming too, yelling at him, shouting his name, and Xander was on his feet, and Spike shoved them both back hard enough it hurt. She saw—saw his yellow eyes slam shut and his hands go to his head in that way she knew so well. The chip firing, but Spike didn't stop, just kept roaring as he sent the table careening wildly onto its side. He screamed and screamed and didn't stop.

And then Buffy had to get out. Had to breathe. She was moving the next instant—not just moving but running. To the door, down the hall, harder and faster until cool night air kissed her cheeks and flooded her lungs, and everything was falling apart. Her skull pounding, her skin burning, her chest cracked. Night had fallen and there were stars overhead—the same stars from her world, but not hers. Stars that belonged to a different universe, a different Buffy—a Buffy that would never see them again.

Stuck. Stuck.

It couldn't be true. It just couldn't.

But she felt, down to her bones, that it was. Why else would Spike scream like that? Spike, who never gave up, no matter what?

Because he felt it too and understood what she did.

There was no going back.

12

YEAH, I WANT A DIFFERENT ANSWER, SO I ASK YOU ONCE AGAIN

In the end, it wasn't as hard as she'd thought it'd be—coming clean.

Okay, that was a lie. But things could have definitely gone worse.

Buffy splashed another handful of water on her face, knowing she was stalling for time but also needing the moment away from the others. The sound of muffled conversation that reached her was enough to exhaust her on principle. It had been a long night—the longest she could recall, ever—filled with explanations and apologies and more confused, worried looks than she could handle. And it wasn't over yet.

Xander had found her outside his apartment, stopped her before she could do what felt natural and take off. Told her that if she was anything like his Buffy, she would know that learning something was *impossible* was nothing if not another wholly surmountable challenge for the Scooby Gang. The fact that she was standing there at all was a testament to that, wasn't it? Buffy should be dead and buried and just look at her. She was alive—still buried, in most ways, but alive nonetheless. In order to get her back to her world, to get *their* Buffy back where she belonged, they needed the whole gang.

The whole gang was fractured at the moment, though. Spike had

bolted without a word—she hadn't even seen him leave. Anya was also too volatile at the moment, so Tara had volunteered to take her out to blow off some steam, and maybe it was better that way, anyway. The journey had started with just the three of them—Buffy, Xander, and Willow.

Buffy had nodded numbly, trying to mask how hurt she was that Spike had left her like he had. When she'd said as much, Xander had favored her with a wry, half-smile and replied, "He just got the worst news a guy can get, Buff. Give him some time and he'll come around."

Two or three beats had passed before the words had landed their punch. Then she'd looked up, wide-eyed. "*Spike* got the worst news?"

"Yeah. Your whole cover story about having been in love with him might have passed the smell test, *maybe*, if it weren't for the fact that where you're from, you're *not* married to Mr. Tall, Dull and Boring." Amazingly, Xander's eyes had twinkled. "That plus Spike's epic freak-out made a lot of things super clear that probably ought to have been for a while now. Like the fact that Buffy—our Buffy—is doing the horizontal mambo with the Evil Dead on the side."

She hadn't known how to respond so she hadn't tried. It had been a long shot, anyway, passing herself off as the lovesick-for-Spike type with her confused state of mind. And even though it wasn't her indiscretion, part of her felt like she needed to justify it all the same. "He—Spike, he told me what happened here with Angel and... Angel's a vampire where I come from. Still. He never came back after leaving Sunnydale."

"Sounds like a big ole check in the plus column, from where I'm standing," Xander had retorted. Then he'd winced as though having caught himself saying something tactless. "I guess, though, you never got over him, huh? If you wished for him to be...well, your husband?"

"That's not what I wished," Buffy had replied, probably with more defensiveness in her tone than was advisable. "I don't even know what I wished. Just... What I told you about Heaven, that was true. And yeah, Spike and I aren't having a torrid affair where I come from, but he has been the only one I can stand to be around for any period of time without feeling like I have to be okay or else I've let someone down. I saw Angel and it did nothing for me, so I thought, maybe if

he'd never left or we'd found a way to stay together, things might be...better."

That soft, understanding look—one that seemed so foreign on Xander—had only deepened. "Sorry," he'd said. "But...also, did you just hear yourself?"

"What?"

"Spike's the only person you can stand to be around. Gonna guess that's why he's the one you talked to here, huh?" He'd waited for her nod before offering one of his own. "Does he love you, where you're from?"

"He says he does." She'd paused, fidgeted. "Yeah, he does. And I know he does. He has for a while."

"Then... I dunno, Buff, maybe seeing what *happily ever after* looks like with Angel was exactly what you needed." When she'd opened her mouth to protest, he'd brought up his hands. "Sorry. I'm just... I've been worried about our Buffy for so long... It's nice knowing that she hasn't been as miserable as we all thought she was."

Personally, Buffy thought that was a matter of how one defined *misery.* That this Buffy had love and support, was in some version of an ideal relationship, would have meant the world if it wasn't something she had to hide. That the best she could do was sneak around with the man she loved because she felt beholden to her vow—even if she understood why—was misery dressed up in different colors.

But, she supposed, that this world's Buffy really did love Spike meant that she was, on some level, happy. At least happier than *she* was, and far less alone.

So Xander had walked Buffy back into his apartment and called Willow. Arrangements had been made, pizza had been ordered, and once Willow had arrived, Buffy had told the story about who she was and how she'd gotten here, hopefully for the last time.

The response had been more of the same. Blank stares, lots of blinking, horror at the idea that Buffy had been in Heaven, and open-mouthed shock as she'd described the wishes. Then something else, something worse, when it had been made clear that she was the reason Giles was dead.

For Buffy, that particular pain was one that seemed a moving target.

It had gone from being all-consuming to almost numb, for as often as her mind dragged her there. Perhaps it was the belief, the hope, the same that felt impossible now, that she would get back to a place where it wasn't true. Where none of this reality was.

It might be a pipe dream, but she couldn't give it up. Xander was right. They had conquered the impossible before. It was kind of their thing.

At the present, though, Buffy felt more physically drained than she'd ever been. It seemed almost impossible that she'd awakened in Spike's bed that afternoon. That just a few hours ago, they'd been going through the stuff at the Magic Box, the thought that she might be on the cusp of going home pushing her forward even as her certainty that they'd find what they were looking for had begun to slip away.

That had been a different world. The one she was in now...

Buffy sighed and splashed some more water on her face. She had to go back out there, see if Willow had thought of anything brilliant since she'd excused herself—a way to open the door between this world and the one she'd left behind. So, with a steeling breath, she dried her face on a spare washcloth, switched off the light, and eased back into the hall.

The voices coming from the kitchen became clearer, the words separating from vaguely English noise the closer she drew. What caused her to stop and listen before she rounded the corner and made her presence known wasn't anything striking—just a sense.

"—seems like Buffy to me," Xander was saying. "Albeit a sad Buffy. But if our Buffy really was in Heaven—"

"That was a different world," Willow whisper-shouted back. "We're taking a lot on faith here."

"Not that different, according to her."

"Again with the faith taking."

"Why shouldn't we? I mean, it's not like things like this haven't happened before. Have we forgotten Mistress Willow, she of the bondage and leather fixation?"

There was a pause—a long one. Then a sigh. Also a long one. "Giles, Xander. She killed *Giles*."

"That's a little harsh, don't you think?"

"Is it, though? I know we've all screwed up magically. A lot if you're, well, me. But none of the things I've done have ever gotten someone killed." Another pause. "Okay, maybe there were some close calls, but usually because of demonus interruptus, not because of the spell itself."

A creak, like Xander had shifted his weight in the chair he'd claimed. "Yeah. I know. It's hard to swallow."

"More than that. Our Buffy is out there somewhere. We don't even know where." Beat. "Do we?"

"Anya was fuzzy on that. I asked her before she left. Could be she's in this Buffy's world, which..."

"Giles and Dawn."

"If she can get out of the loop thingy that this Buffy told us about."

"She can. It's Buffy."

"*That's* Buffy, too," Xander said.

"But...not really. Not our Buffy." Another long stretch of silence, this one almost crushingly heavy. "Don't give me that look," Willow replied. "I know you, Alexander Lavelle Harris, so don't even pretend like I'm saying something you're not thinking. She's not our Buffy. We need *our* Buffy."

"I'm not *not* saying anything," Xander said in a low rush. "But... Will, if she is in this Buffy's world, though, would she even want to come back?"

"What? How can you even ask me that?"

"Giles. And Dawn. Plus, she's not married to lard-ass over there. And if she is in love with Spike—"

"Yeah, how weird is that?"

"Focus, Will."

"Just saying, best friend here. You'd think she'd let us know."

"Right," Xander replied dryly. "'Cause after everything she went through, after making you the maid of honor at her wedding, after the whole drama-fest that was her and Angel, for her to become Mrs. Former Fang-Face and then start getting some on the side? It would be of the huge. And it'd mean admitting that things didn't work out the

way she thought they would and facing a fair amount of the 'I told you so's' chorus."

"I would never say 'I told you so'!"

"No, but I definitely would. And let's face it, you're a lousy liar."

"I've...gotten better." A sigh. "Fine. But you think she'd do that—our Buffy? Just...step into some life that's not hers because everything's rainbows and lollipops?"

Buffy chewed on the inside of her cheek to stave off the urge to laugh—or scream. Or some combination thereof. Maybe she would start laughing and never stop, just laugh herself all the way to the funny farm. The world she'd been so desperate to escape, the one that had been slowly suffocating her without being considerate enough to finish her off, was another Buffy's idea of paradise. That there was some grade-A comedy.

She hadn't allowed herself to think that far ahead—what had become of this world's Buffy. Up until now, Buffy had her in some sort of mental stasis. Not here but not there, either. Just somewhere in the in-between, perhaps similar to the place where Angel's soul disappeared to when it wasn't confined within his body, only not there because this world's Buffy wasn't dead. She was just somewhere else. A *somewhere else* that could be nowhere at all or her own world, like Anya had theorized.

Though Buffy couldn't say she much liked the thought of the other Buffy living it up in a Sunnydale where her watcher was alive, her sister wasn't in the wind, and her marital status was less complicated. Because Xander had a point there. Would that Buffy even want to come back to this world if she'd ended up in one where her most pressing problems were suddenly *not* problems anymore? Would she even know it wasn't her world? Would she think to ask?

Maybe she would be caught in the mummy hand loop forever. Or, perhaps a more clearheaded Buffy would see the way to break the loop. After all, once she saw her watcher was alive and the shop was operating normally, a little problem like a temporal vortex would be downright simple.

Then what? Would that Buffy go to Spike? Wait, stupid question. Of course she would. She'd see Dawn was okay, find no evidence that

Angel had ever lived at Revello Drive, then hurry to a crypt that was much more Spartan than the one she had here but still home to the vampire she loved. A vampire whose eyes would light up the second he saw her, and though he might not understand why she threw herself into his arms, he definitely wouldn't complain. Hell, he'd probably have her on her back before she could choke out more than a strangled *hello*. No telling if this world's Buffy would object to that, have the same iron-clad view on what constituted adultery as her Spike. But then, who was to say that Buffy would even understand that the Spike over there wasn't hers? Maybe she'd think Willow had done another spell or something. No reason to think her brain would immediately go to *not my reality*.

The idea of some other Buffy touching *her* Spike, the one who had tended to her cut hands and told her that he'd saved her every night since she'd jumped, had Buffy's stomach twisting. That would be the Buffy he wanted. The one a little less broken, a little more certain, and a whole lot more in love with him than the one who swung by to share her silences.

The least popular Buffy in two different dimensions. There should be an award for that sort of achievement.

Buffy skimmed her hands down her sides, then cleared her throat loudly to announce herself. Almost immediately, the conversation at the dinner table died, both Willow and Xander greeting her with the fakest of fake smiles.

"Hey," Willow said brightly. "Thought you might've gotten lost."

"In Xander's apartment?"

"Well, who knows if it's the same apartment as it is over where you're from, right?" She barked a harsh laugh, then winced. "Sorry. I'm being weird."

"Only by a lot," Xander said.

"It's okay," Buffy said. Not because it was okay—nothing was okay—but it seemed better to pretend. Just like they were pretending they hadn't been talking about her a moment ago. "I... Ahh, any ideas?"

Willow and Xander exchanged a glance. "Umm, it'll take a while," Willow replied. "I've never done a dimension search like this. We don't know how many there are, for starters, or how they're positioned. I

mean, I'd *think* the ones closest to our reality would be, well, *closest*, as in physically, but that's a whole level of thinking I've only ever done in theory."

Xander arched an eyebrow. "Thinking in theory? Is that a thing?"

"Well, you know. Stargazing with your honey, you start talking. A-about how bad you feel for the worlds where a Willow doesn't have her Tara or has never met her or something. Then freaking yourself out feeling so sorry for that Willow that Tara has to give you extra snuggles to remind you that you're not that Willow." Her cheeks went a little pink and she glanced down. "Or something way less specific."

Buffy offered what she hoped was an understanding smile, though it felt strained and—if Willow's deepening blush were any indication—didn't look much better. "So we don't know," she said.

"I know it's possible," Willow replied. "I mean, the oft-referenced incident with vampire-me and... Wait. Do you even know what we're talking about? I shouldn't just assume. There was this whole thing where Anya—"

"Vampire you, major with the skankwear," Buffy confirmed. "We mojoed her back to her world before she could turn the Bronze into yet another headline featuring the words 'numerous teens slain' and 'massive neck trauma.'"

Willow blinked. "Okay...so your world is *really* similar to this one."

Buffy nodded, pursing her lips. "All the differences seem to be the result of something that didn't happen when I visited Angel in LA after the Thanksgiving Day wannabe massacre at Giles's."

"Angel turning human," the redhead mused. "If that's the case, there's only one point of difference of note. Granted, it's a really pointy point of difference, but it's like the ripple effect. You know—the idea that one little pond ripple grows and grows and grows and—" She cut herself off, catching Xander's somewhat dull stare. "Anyway, the point is, because we sent vampire-me back to her world, I know it can be done. It's just the finding of the other world that's going to be tricky."

"Why?"

"It's kinda the opposite of what we did then," Willow said. "We were in the main timeline trying to find the offshoot. Only now we're in the offshoot trying to find the main one. Or, your main one. I mean,

the theory's the same but it could get complicated. Plus, *that* timeline was a major variation of this one. The one we're looking for isn't."

Buffy thought about Angel chowing down on chips, ignoring her when she'd crashed on the couch and telling her that he wished he were a vampire again. Maybe Willow's definition of *major variation* was different from hers. "I don't know about that."

"Well, I know it can seem like that, but...look at everything that didn't change," Willow said. "For instance, all things Adam? Glory? Dawn being the Key? The whole death and resurrection? Sunnydale looks pretty much the same here as it does in your world. The Sunnydale the other-me was from was... Well, from the few glimpses I got of it, very not. Whatever wish created that timeline was significant enough to really screw with the way things went. Your wishes weren't." At that, Willow looked down, and her eyes started to fill. "I mean...yet. That Giles is gone... That could lead to a huge variation. But it hasn't. Not yet. Makes the world harder to find, among the bajillion worlds that could be out there. And even if there is a huge variation in what happens in this timeline from yours, there's no way to know...since we're here and not there."

Buffy nodded again, though she didn't understand any of it, except that Willow seemed to have taken the scenic route on explaining just how very screwed she was.

"But Buffy?" Willow added. "We'll send you back."

Though not without that dose of sunny optimism.

"I mean, I know you're Buffy and everything, but you're not our Buffy and our Buffy—"

But Buffy stopped listening. She didn't really want to hear more about this world's Buffy—the Buffy who had her act together, more or less, and might well have been handed the golden ticket to her very own utopia because some other Buffy had been desperate enough to make a bad trade. And just like in her world, the Scoobies were doing their best to see the bright side of everything, feeding her platitudes they couldn't promise weren't empty, dancing around obvious and uncomfortable truths. She didn't want to be with people who told her what she wanted to hear. Who rode their optimism into the ground, or

otherwise expected Buffy to come up with some miraculous save because that was what she did.

Apparently, even world-hopping wasn't enough to spare her the weight of expectation. And, like before, she felt there was only one person she could be around.

Spike wouldn't give her platitudes. He'd be straight with her—perhaps painfully so, but even pain was better than this.

"I gotta go," Buffy said, cutting Willow off mid-speculation and making her way toward the door. "I... I just gotta go. Patrol. Or something." Even she heard the lie in her voice, but thankfully neither Xander nor Willow called her on it. They did nothing, actually—no objections, no questions, no nothing. She'd decide later whether or not to be upset at the fact.

"Let us know how our vamps measure up over here," Xander said.

Buffy forced a tight smile and looked over her shoulder. "Yeah. Okay," she said, then paused when she reached the door, something else occurring to her. Something that she had to address before she left, just in case Spike asked her—it was the least she could do. "Umm...about me not being your Buffy or...*any* of what's going on with Spike. Please don't tell Angel. That's not my—"

"Buff," Xander said, "don't worry."

"We don't see Angel all that often," Willow added.

"And we like it that way."

"And you're right. It is Buffy's—*our* Buffy's—place to tell him."

She released a deep breath, feeling a little better, though just a little. There was more there that she didn't want to get in to—Angel's feelings about his own humanity, the brunt of his anger at learning she'd wished for him to be miserable, even if that hadn't been the intent. After everything she'd been through with the people who still liked her here, the thought of dealing with Angel was exhausting in itself. Never mind the can of worms that was the fact that he was being cuckolded by his own however-they-were-related vampire relation.

"Anya and Tara?" she asked.

"Never see him," Xander said. "And Anya—I'll talk to Anya."

Buffy wasn't sure what good that would do, but she also couldn't

ask for much else. Whatever happened would happen. All she could do was deal.

"Thanks," she said, then slipped out of the apartment without another word.

SHE HADN'T INTENDED to actually patrol, but the second she was outside, breathing in the night air, she realized that she hadn't taken a tour of the graveyards since she'd been in this world, which seemed careless. Even if things hadn't gone the way she'd intended, the people who lived in this version of Sunnydale no more deserved death by extreme and sudden blood loss than did those on the other side of the veil. Wherever the veil was. So Buffy directed her feet toward Sunnydale Cemetery, snapped the sturdiest-looking twig she could find off a low-hanging branch, and made the normal rounds. Perhaps a more together slayer would have headed home for a proper stake, but home meant the possibility of running into Angel, and she didn't think she could face him again just yet. She was certain she didn't want to.

Sunnydale Cemetery was low on action, though she managed to make a couple of dust clouds before moving onto the next stop on her normal rounds. She told herself she wouldn't approach a certain rosewood tree when she reached Shady Hill, but she knew the second the thought crossed her mind that she was full of it. Not that Buffy was enough of a tree person to identify a rosewood out of a lineup; still, she somehow knew exactly which tree Spike had been referring to. One by a rather garish headstone that had always struck her as funny, since the only engraving on the thing was the surname, *Lazarus.* No epitaph to speak of. Too bad Willow hadn't decided to raise him from the dead instead.

And beside Lazarus was the tree, and somehow Buffy's eyes immediately knew where to go to find the notch Spike had mentioned. Perhaps it was more muscle memory, this body understanding things her mind did not.

There was a note tucked in there against the bark, near enough to the ground and hidden enough by the Lazarus headstone that it

wouldn't be in anyone's natural line of sight. Still, she could see why Spike and this world's Buffy had stuck to nicknames for each other, for the notes couldn't be entirely hidden. If someone were to come around to tend to the graves or leave flowers and happened to be standing at just the right angle, they'd see something there that clearly didn't belong. And being that this world's Buffy wasn't going to swing by anytime soon to collect her correspondence, leaving it there seemed careless.

At least that was what Buffy told herself as she snatched the note up. And once it was in her hand, reading it seemed a foregone conclusion.

Beatrice—

You like driving me crazy, don't you? Don't know what's wrong but you know I'm not the guy you run from. Come 'round soon or I'll have to make a house call.

Benedick

She sighed, tracing her eyes over the letters—a marriage of sloppy cursive and what she could tell had once been rather elegant penmanship. Such a small thing, small but intensely personal—his handwriting, something she'd never seen, which seemed strange considering all they had shared.

She was also taken by how vividly she heard him in his words, as though he were standing behind her, whispering into her ear. The low rumble of his voice, even the lilt of his accent, confined within a medium that forced restraint. Couldn't say too much or he'd be easy to identify. Couldn't say too little or Buffy might miss the urgency, the desperation. All of that combined with just enough of a threat that she could easily picture herself—or the other Buffy—immediately rushing over to Restfield to both berate him for even hinting that he might do such a thing and reassure him that all was well. Or at least tell him what *was* wrong so he could help her shoulder the weight.

That was what this Spike did, after all. Shoulder the weight.

Buffy stuffed the note in her pocket, deciding she'd stalled enough. Even if Spike didn't want to see her, he *did* want to see her. He always did.

"Was wonderin' when you'd show," Spike said by way of greeting when she let herself into his crypt fifteen minutes later. "Thought you mighta forgotten your way."

He was sprawled across the couch they'd sat on the night before, a drink in one hand, the other behind his head. He'd shed the duster, of course, and the button-up shirt he'd had on earlier was now completely open, giving her a tantalizing view of pale abs and a smooth, hard chest. The top button of his jeans was undone as well. Yet even though everything about him seemed to invite her ogling, Buffy somehow found herself staring at his bare feet. There were so many parts of Spike she had never considered before, and his feet were one of them. He'd kicked her with those feet, molded them into weapons just assuredly as she did hers. But without his boots, they were just feet. Toes and everything.

Spike and all his parts. His handwriting. His feet. Parts she never should have been made aware of, yet here she was.

"How are you?" she asked hoarsely.

He arched an eyebrow, took a long look at his drink as though it held the answer. "Me? I'm swell, thanks for askin'."

"Okay, so it was a stupid question." She crossed her arms, rocked a bit on her heels. If he were going explode on her, she wished he'd just get on with it. "I patrolled. Not much going on out there."

Spike snorted, nodded. "Don't think I left much for you."

"You patrolled?"

"Gotta get my kicks in somehow, don't I?" He threw back a mouthful of whatever he was drinking. "And I dunno about you, Slayer, but I find I need a spot of violence more after gettin' bad news."

"That's a lie."

"Oh, is it?"

"Yeah." Buffy waffled a moment, then decided to press her luck by inching forward a step. "When you said you don't know about me. That's the lie. You know me...a lot."

He tilted his head, studying her in that quiet way of his, as though he were weighing her sincerity. Maybe he was. If the tables were turned, she knew that was what she'd be doing. She'd been volleying back and forth between understanding him and insulting him since

she'd arrived, infuriating him simply by existing in a space that belonged to someone else. That he'd been as patient with her as he had spoke to virtues she never would have assumed him to possess. She'd come here, leaned on him, and he'd let her. But he hadn't rolled over for her, hadn't let her forget who she was—and more importantly, who she wasn't. His help had come with the not-so-tacit understanding that he was doing it less for her and more for the *her* who belonged here.

The *her* that she might have banished away forever, according to Anya. The Buffy who loved him back.

At once, coming here seemed like the stupidest thing she could have done, and definitely the cruelest. She was the reason Spike was hurting, after all. All because of a wish she'd made.

"Spike," Buffy said, forcing herself to move a few paces toward him, "I'm... I'm sorry."

His eyes narrowed.

"For... Well, for everything." She looked down, turning the twig she'd fashioned into a makeshift stake over in her hands. "I know there's nothing I can do. I know I ruined..."

But she trailed off, the concept still a bit too large for her—this thing birthed from her carelessness. That aching desperation that made her feel simultaneously hollow and weighted down by stones, every step a struggle, every breath a personal victory. She'd stood there at the Magic Box, holding a thing she knew was bad and managed to convince herself that the worst that could come of it would be better than the best offered by the hell that was living again. Not realizing she was condemning more than just herself when she dared whisper her wishes—somehow creating and destroying a world in the same stroke. Breathing this version of Sunnydale into existence and ripping away the Buffy who belonged here in one stupidly bold move.

She didn't realize she was crying until a cool hand cupped her cheek, flicked a tear away. Buffy inhaled sharply and looked up, and Spike was there. He could be so quiet when he wanted to be.

"Not a one of 'em can understand what you were goin' through," he said, and she heard now how hoarse he was. Probably all the screaming he'd done back at Xander's. Or maybe he'd come home and screamed some more. Now that he was closer, she saw the fatigue around his

eyes, the telltale signs that he'd spent a good chunk of time crying, too. "You wanted to make it better for yourself, Slayer. Wager any of us woulda done the same."

She'd been prepared for his rage and his heartbreak, not his kindness. The pressure at her chest intensified and her eyes filled with more hot, messy tears. "No. You wouldn't."

"Yeah, I would. If it hadn't been for Dawn, I mighta gotten it in my head to see about hunting down a warlock or summat, see if the clock could turn back the other way." He offered a pained grin at her confused blink, tucked her hair behind her ear. "Lots of things I thought about after I had you back. Remember lyin' downstairs that first night when you were all tucked up against me, wonderin' how the bloody hell I'd managed a lick of it without you. Runnin' through what I'd do if I ever lost you again. Needed a plan, see." Spike pressed his eyes closed, his face falling. He stumbled a step back and let out a long, shaky breath. "Shoulda known better. Always muckin' up my plans, Summers."

"I'm sorry."

"Know it. Nothin' to be done for it now."

No, there wasn't. Nothing that she could see, at least, with Willow expounding all the reasons why finding her home would be an uphill battle because its differences were so minute they hardly mattered, except to the people those differences affected. She couldn't even search for a world without a Buffy, because the other Buffy might be living it up, embracing a life where she had everything she wanted. Sure, she'd inherit money problems, but what was money when compared to having back your surrogate father or knowing your sister was safe and where she belonged? What did anything material matter when she didn't have the burden of a husband she no longer loved and the stress that came with living a secret life with the man she did?

Even if Willow managed to sneak a peek of the world that was Buffy's home, would she recognize it? Or would everyone over there just be too darn happy?

The thought that any of that might be true was enough to make Buffy hate the Buffy everyone missed. And maybe that was why she

said it—she wanted to do something the other one hadn't. Get ahead, in whatever way she could.

"I'll leave Angel."

Spike's eyes flew open and he whipped his head up. "Oh?"

"If I'm stuck here, I'll do it. I'll leave him." She shifted her weight between her feet, not sure how to interpret his stare. "I can't live with him and I can't stay here forever. He's waiting to be told what to do and that's not fair to him." More staring. Buffy flushed, feeling herself growing defensive. "What?"

"Nothin'. Just surprised, is all."

"Why?"

"Well, you made that wish to get him here. Gonna give it up just like that?"

Again, this Spike's propensity for being forthright caught her off guard. She wasn't sure what she'd expected—perhaps that he would see an opening and seize it, having realized the Buffy who loved him was stuck, likely forever, somewhere else. And if she cleared the path for him to reclaim some of what he'd had before, maybe she would be deserving of the same tenderness and affection he'd given so freely before he'd learned the truth.

But he was right, too. At least in part. Painful as her last conversation with Angel had been, Buffy wasn't sure she was ready to walk away from that part of herself just yet. She didn't think she could say she loved Angel anymore, but that alone was enough of a revelation to leave her mind spinning. At some point, Angel had become more than just the person—he'd been an ideal, the impossible romance and the great love of her life. He'd embodied the very concept of love for her, and letting go of that meant letting go of a piece of herself, one she'd held on to for so long that even the thought of being without it was somewhat terrifying.

How fortunate for the other Buffy to have suffered that loss in degrees rather than all at once. Had she even missed it when she'd realized it was gone?

"I can't be with him," Buffy said at last, and that was perfectly true. A reflection of the reality she'd lived in ever since Angel had walked away. She couldn't be with him so she would make the best of it, be

with someone else. In this world, it didn't matter that *someone else* was Spike, because the normal boy route had blown up in her face rather spectacularly. "I can't, so yeah. I'd leave him. This isn't what I wanted."

Spike said nothing for a moment, then nodded, his eyes losing some of their hardness. "Good on you."

"Would that...change anything with us?"

"How's that?"

"If I'm not with Angel and I'm here... You said you love me because I'm Buffy, so...would it?"

He fell quiet once more, his face unreadable, which was all kinds of frustrating. Not once in all the time she'd known him had Spike ever been this closed off.

"I love Buffy," he agreed after a stretch. "Means I do love you, much as it mucks with my head. But you don't love me."

Buffy said nothing, just swallowed.

"Maybe if I hadn't felt it, havin' you with me would be enough." He shook his head, though, like he didn't believe it. "But I do know, Slayer. What we had was too good, hard as it was at times. Would rather keep the memory of that than try again with a bird who isn't mine. With someone who doesn't love me."

"I think I could learn," Buffy blurted, not sure why—not even sure she was telling the truth—only that the door closing on the possibility of there being anything with Spike, of him ever looking at her the way he had the other night, had her heart thumping and her pulse thundering and her head screaming in protest. "I—"

Spike held up a hand. The smile on his face was fond, though it somehow made the pain in his eyes worse. "Don't," he said, and that was all he said.

And though the urge was there to ignore him, press on, Buffy managed to smother it. She'd already done enough damage for one night and was fortunate to not have exhausted her welcome at his crypt. Any more and he might kick her out again, permanently this time.

The fight wasn't one she would win, either. Not now. But maybe tomorrow.

It wasn't like she was going anywhere anytime soon.

BUFFY DREAMED OF HOME.

It was one of those *just happened* dreams. No helpful guide to tell her how it was done, no blueprints left behind. She was just there. Standing in a downtown Sunnydale that was *her* Sunnydale, and everything was okay again. Everything was right.

There were people to find. Giles and Dawn. People she'd lost in one way or another she wanted to hug and love. She'd tell them she was sorry, too, even if she didn't know for what. The sensation of regret was real and deep, like a persistent itch that needed constant attention, and she couldn't wait. She had to find them, and now she could. This was her Sunnydale, after all. The other one was nothing more than a bad memory.

Only when she pushed her way into the Magic Box, there was a Buffy already there, sitting with her friends and her sister. A Buffy who wasn't her and definitely didn't belong. Buffy stared at her for what seemed like a long time, then turned to her friends to let them know everything was fixed. This Buffy could have her world back now—the real Buffy had come home to stay.

Except her friends were scowling at her. Their mouths didn't move but she heard voices loud and clear.

Go away, Dawn said.

Buffy blinked, stared at the other Buffy, who stared back with quiet calm. No, she wouldn't go away. There had been a mistake.

No mistake, Giles told her solemnly. This Buffy was just better.

A real sister, Dawn agreed.

She brought the good candy, Xander threw in.

She said thank you, according to Willow.

But it wasn't right. None of this was right. The other Buffy had a world—it might not be the best world, but it was hers, as much as this world was Buffy's. She couldn't have both.

The other Buffy gave her a pitying look. Shouldn't have left, that look said. Finders keepers.

Then Spike emerged from the training room, and Buffy felt herself relax, but not a full relax. A relax that warned of oncoming danger. She

didn't know why, but she did know why, which was why she wasn't surprised when he wrapped an arm around the other Buffy and kissed her. A kiss with a hard R rating, but one her friends observed with almost malicious satisfaction, all while Buffy could do nothing but stare as the world was ripped out from under her.

Thankfully, that was the moment she awoke.

Less thankfully—the story hadn't changed. At least not on this side of the veil.

She was in Spike's bed, same as she had been the previous day. A Spike who loved her, same as her own, but not. A Spike who had once again let her into his space rather than send her home to a husband she couldn't talk to. Everything had come crashing down for him yesterday, hard and fast, and it might never be right again. And instead of hating her, cursing her for what she'd done—what she'd taken from him, even unknowingly—he'd made caring for her a priority. Not even that—a given.

"I can't go home," Buffy had said. "I'm not ready to talk to him."

"Then don't," he'd replied. "Easier to get to work if you're here, anyhow."

"Work?"

He'd given her a blank look. "Gettin' you back, of course."

Buffy hadn't said anything to that, just nodded. There were things she still needed to tell him—what Willow had said about looking for the other world, how it was feasible in theory if not in practice. And other things about where his Buffy might be, who she might be with, the possibility that she might not want to return. But she hadn't said any of that, too exhausted and heartsick, and, if she were honest, worried that he would get angry again and take away her sanctuary.

So, they'd gone downstairs. Spike had shed his shirt but kept on his jeans. Precaution, he'd told her as they'd climbed into bed. He and Buffy had a very active sex life, which was why she'd awakened that day the way she had, with him kissing and caressing her, ready for an indulgent shag. When they got to wake up beside each other, they took full advantage.

Buffy must have made a face, for he'd asked if she'd prefer him to sleep somewhere else and she'd said no. Meaning it. Waking up the

way she had, even if it had been meant for someone else, had been the best part of her day.

She'd been warm, safe, and loved, and that had been nice. Not hers, but nice.

But she hadn't said as much, worried that he'd take it the wrong—or maybe the right—way. Instead, she'd told him she didn't mind, and she didn't want to kick him out of his own bed. She wasn't that mean.

He'd nodded and climbed in beside her. And like the previous night, he'd kept the full mattress between them.

He was curled around her now, though. An arm tugging her back against his chest, his face pressed to her neck. Every few minutes, he'd breathe, and the sensation made her shiver. It wasn't fair, that he breathed or that she felt it, or that those breaths weren't for her—that none of this was.

She was in a world where Spike loved her best when he was asleep, because then he could pretend.

Pretending, apparently, was something she couldn't do. Figments and flashes from the dream, which wasn't doing the decent thing and fading from memory, danced across her mind in vivid Technicolor, and they echoed the harsh truths of her reality. She was stranded, possibly forever, in a world that wasn't hers. A world where her friends, who were not her friends, whispered about her when she left a room. Where Angel could hardly stand the sight of her, and even Spike couldn't say he would be what she needed to survive, because she wasn't what he needed. Because she couldn't be.

And if she did manage to find her way home, what then?

The other world had been difficult, suffocating most of the time, and she'd wanted out of it so much. She'd craved the quiet of death with such ferocity that she'd scared herself, both in the thoughts she'd entertained and the steps she'd refused to take. That she could have thoughts like that at all had made her wonder just how much of Buffy Summers had actually crawled out of that grave, as that was not the Buffy she remembered. And she'd tried—she'd wanted so badly to feel anything like herself. She'd mentally rehearse the things she'd say, the way she'd act when around her friends, as though she could trick her mind and body into forgetting that it wanted out of this world. But when it came

time to do it, to be with her friends and Dawn and be Buffy, the weight of their expectation had dragged her down, down, down until the only sane thing to do was get as far away from them as she could.

Spike had been her lifeline. Her dark, safe harbor where she could sit with her misery without it overrunning her. Quiet was okay and being *not* okay was also okay. Spike's space was the only space she'd had that felt like hers, because he was hers, even if she never decided to claim him. He'd made her a promise and he'd stuck by it, before death, after death, and now after life itself.

The Spike curled around her now wasn't hers. He said the right words, made the right calls, gave her what he could, but he belonged to a different Buffy. A Buffy he might never see again but remained loyal to all the same. A Buffy who might be living it up in the picture-perfect world she had been so eager to leave. Buffy had wanted to ask him last night what he thought about that, if he'd considered the fact that his Buffy might not mind which Spike she was with to the same degree—but then it wasn't the same, was it? Both Spikes loved Buffy. Only one of those Buffys loved Spike back. And if it was true, if that Buffy had the run of the other world, then it seemed certain the place she'd been so eager to flee would no longer be available to her. Who would want her back when they could have a version of her who *was* her, only less miserable?

Spike started to stir behind her, just as he had the previous morning. First with soft strokes of her belly, then with a low groan, his body sensing hers and not sensing anything else. She should move, push him back, wake him up and remind him that she wasn't his Buffy. She should do that, but she didn't want to, because this was nice. Being with him was nice. *Pretending* was nice. And she could pretend. If she tried hard enough, she could make herself believe for a few stolen seconds that she was the one he wanted. That the world outside made sense and there was no reason to hide. No cause for the steady pulse of dread thrumming beneath her skin or the ache in her chest. He'd made her feel so good with so little just a couple of nights ago. She'd been pretending then, too. Why had she ever stopped?

She'd told him last night, hadn't she? She could learn. She could try.

She could become the Buffy they all wanted. It was inside her, wasn't it? It had to be if the other Buffy had it. If, even amid the horror of being alive again, she'd managed some semblance of peace. All she had to do was dig down and find it. Fake it until she made it. Pretend until it wasn't pretending anymore.

Would that be so bad?

Spike purred as if he heard her thoughts, thrusting himself against her backside. She only had seconds now before he awoke. Seconds to prove to him that she could be that Buffy too. She didn't let herself think, couldn't. She had to act, and so she did, twisting in his arms in such a way that she rolled beneath him. There was a second to register that his weight was considerable but not suffocating—that he didn't leave her feeling dwarfed and smothered, and that she liked that—before she began peppering kisses along his bare chest. And at the first touch of her lips, Spike gave a little growl and began to breathe harder, like he was dragging her into him, which was fine with her because that was where she wanted to be.

"Mmm," he rumbled in a low voice that was thick with sleep. "Frisky this mornin', are we?"

Buffy nodded, dragging her mouth from his chest and pressing it against his. She had a vague memory of the way he'd kissed her at the Bronze—vaguer ones of the night they'd spent betrothed—but no memory did the feel of his lips and tongue justice. Apparently, Spike hadn't been kidding. He did always wake up hungry for her and was not shy about showing her just how much. It was all she could do to keep up with him, nipping, sucking, exploring, and more and more and more as she reached for the clasp of his jeans.

Then Spike froze above her, and she knew.

"Bloody hell," he muttered, and then she was alone, cold, left staring up at the ceiling as the mattress dipped and whined. The loss that ripped through her was damn near crushing—her lungs felt full, but she couldn't breathe. And Spike was on the other side of the bed, panting. When she turned to him, she found him staring at her with his eyes dark and filled with an apology she didn't need, panting harder still.

"Might we oughta find a different place for you to sleep after all, love," he said. "Seems I can't help myself."

Something burst inside of her. She didn't want him to help himself. Couldn't he see that?

"It's okay," Buffy rushed to tell him, exploding into movement before her mind could catch up with her. In a flash, she was against him again, struggling for air still, clawing for something she knew he could give if he just understood how much she needed it. If she could just show him. So that's what she had to do—show him. Her mouth found the smooth planes of his chest once more, her hands wandering over cool flesh that seemed to tremble beneath her. She scraped her teeth along one of his nipples, and he shook with his low moan. "I want this, Spike. I want you."

"Buffy—"

She was astride him the next second, desperate to stay ahead of the end of that sentence. He wanted her—she knew he did. Could feel it, both between her legs and in the weight of his stare. She just had to be fast, had to show him, had to be *her*. Before he found his voice again, she'd covered her mouth with his, seizing the waistband of his jeans with one hand and stroking over his erection with the other.

He gripped her shoulders. Not in a sexy-grabby way, but in a we-need-to-stop way, and she knew he meant to push her off. That he didn't understand what this was, what she was trying to tell him. But she knew she was close. If she could just...

Buffy forced him back, harder than she intended but to the same effect. He hit the mattress, flat, and she scaled down his body. Quickly, quickly, finishing what she'd started with his jeans and pulling out his cock. Spike barked her name, sounding both stunned and desperate—maybe even as desperate as she was—and the syllables fell into another low moan as she wrapped her lips around him and pulled him into her mouth.

"Fuck, Slayer..." Spike bucked and gasped. When she looked up, she saw his head thrown back against the pillow, his face contorted in something between pain and ecstasy. But it only lasted a second—the span of a few sucks, still hurried, still determined to keep ahead of him until he melted entirely—and then he was up, the ecstasy gone, in its

place something she couldn't identify, and he had seized her by the shoulders again, harder than before, and shoved.

Buffy crashed against the floor with a jolt, and it was like her mind had burst free of some trance. Some different place she'd been, as though she'd been still halfway stuck in that dream, stranded and abandoned and frantic to cling to the only person that made living even a little tolerable. But now she was on the floor beside the bed, not entirely sure how she'd gotten there, her palms scraped from where they had skidded across the stone.

"Are you outta your mind?"

She blinked, shook her head to clear it, only that didn't help. What the hell had just happened?

"Anyone ever tell you not to touch what's not yours?" Spike snapped, rounding the bed. He was still half-dressed, his cock tucked back inside his jeans. For some reason that surprised her—she couldn't say why. Buffy blinked again, shook her head again, only now it was swimming. Like she was inside a fishbowl.

"Get out."

Her heart dropped, nearly taking her with it. Buffy kept shaking her head, her temples pounding, her heart pounding too, so hard and so fast it hurt. Like her ribcage might just crack against the strain. And Spike was standing over her, glaring at her as he never had before. Never, over the course of countless fights, both verbal and physical. As though he didn't know her—or worse, that he didn't want to. As though she was something other than Buffy.

"Did I bleeding stutter?" Spike snapped. "Get the fuck out."

It came slowly, the realization of what had just happened. The dream gone now, leaving nothing but the echoes of that desperation behind. Desperation that had included action.

Oh god, what had she done?

"I—" she tried to say, but words wouldn't come. Spike had a hand around her arm now and the floor was moving. No, *he* was moving—dragging her without care across the span of his bedroom. Up the ladder, even, so roughly that her hips and knees and gut struck the beams every few seconds, pounding bruises into her skin. If the chip fired, though, she didn't see it. She didn't even see him in full until he

shoved her against the pillar in the middle of the crypt, where she landed hard enough her spine screamed in protest.

Still, Spike advanced in slow, even strides. A predator to prey. And everything was wrong.

"You think it's that easy?" he said, now in a low growl. "That you could just be a stand-in? That that's all she's worth to me?"

Buffy shook her head, choking back a sob. "Spike, I—"

"I don't care. Get out. This isn't your place, Slayer. Never was. Get out."

For a moment she didn't move, didn't breathe, did nothing at all. Just stared at him, willing herself to understand what had just happened. To catch up with her own spinning head, things that had been clear going muddy and vice versa, and at the center of it the core knowledge that she had done something she couldn't come back from. That whatever she'd done had been beyond bad—it had broken what was already fragile between them in such a way that it could never be fixed.

Whatever she'd had here was over and it was all her fault.

Just like everything else.

13

SUCH A PAINFUL TRIP TO FIND OUT THIS IS IT

The sun stung her eyes, offensively bright. Glaring, almost, like it knew what she had done.

What *had* she done?

It was the monkey's paw all over again—the path there, in her head, coaxing her forward, whispering little lies and assurances, lining up the steps she needed to take in order to reclaim her life. That aching emptiness that had been festering, exacerbated by her own dumb choices, by the solutions her fractured mind had managed to convince her were not only correct, but within her grasp if she was just daring enough to go seize them. That she could have a little Novocain for her bruised and battered soul by saying the right things, doing the right things, being the right Buffy.

Two different realities and her problem remained the same. The Buffy who had torn her way through the earth was far removed from the one her friends had laid inside it. She could do all the moves, imitate the voice to perfection, smile and laugh at all the right moments, and act her way through her own life, but the effort itself had been killing her by inches.

The only person she could be her authentic self around was Spike.

And look at what she'd done.

Buffy made it to the edge of Restfield before it hit her in full, the realization that she had been trying to seduce Spike, so single-minded in that objective, convinced that if he felt how she was the same as the woman he loved he would give her more of that mind-numbing bliss from two nights ago. All he had to do was let her show him, prove that she could be the Buffy he wanted in body if not in mind.

All he had to do was let her have her way, dammit.

The first tears cracked over her cheeks when her feet hit the pavement. Adultery had been on her list of things she'd thought she'd never do—unspoken and unacknowledged, a given, but there nonetheless. It existed in her sphere because it had touched her, made its impact on her, and informed her personal ethical code. Since it had hit her world in a dramatic fashion, its presence had been unavoidable. Learning that she had the capacity to do something she found so morally repugnant had been a hard blow. One she was still walking off, if she were being honest, even if she could see the way there. The circumstances that had led some version of herself to do what would have once been unthinkable.

What she had just done to Spike hadn't been anywhere on her list of things she'd never do—it hadn't been anywhere on her radar as a possibility. One of those things so laughably *not Buffy* that to even mention it was a waste of time. She was just minutes away from it now, stumbling under the rays of that godawful sun from the scene of the crime, and she was still foggy on how exactly it had happened.

How she'd let it happen.

How she'd let herself do...that.

Already she felt the gremlins of self-preservation hard at work, cooking up justifications and excuses—a veritable chorus of things she could tell herself to assuage the terrible burden of guilt. Echoes of watcher lectures past, assuring her that vampires weren't people, weren't anything but monsters walking around in human skin, and whatever she'd done to a monster didn't matter. Reminding her that Spike had commissioned a sex doll in her likeness, so it wasn't like he was an innocent victim. Dragging her back to those first few seconds when he had clearly been into what she was doing, the bliss that had flirted across his face when she'd pulled him into her mouth. *It couldn't*

have been that bad, some nasty part of her whispered. *He's just mad he enjoyed it.*

The thoughts bubbled up, ugly and cancerous, and she was disgusted with herself for having them. More disgusted at how good they felt, how the screaming inside her head quieted under their calm encouragement.

Perhaps a stronger Buffy would have let them carry her away. But this Buffy was not strong. She had never felt so weak in her life. And to give in to those thoughts would be a different sort of betrayal—a betrayal of the person she knew Spike was now, had known for a while if she were being honest with herself. Diminishing him to those things he couldn't control while overlooking his handling of the things he could.

No one had made him carve out space for her. He'd been her quiet companion in her world, that underlying sense of *want* and *love* always there—unspoken and unacknowledged, but there all the same. Listening to her talk when she needed to talk and letting her sit when she needed the silence, expecting nothing from her and accepting her as she was without dressing her up to be someone else. More of that pull that had been there since Glory had made him her personal pincushion, that thrill she'd experienced on the stairs before the final battle when he'd told her that she treated him like a man, even if she hadn't wanted to admit it.

Then this world's Spike, who was so faithful to Buffy that not just any Buffy would do, but made sure she knew he loved her because of who she was. This world's Spike who had let her back into his home—into his bed, even—after learning she might have destroyed everything that mattered to him.

She'd taken advantage of that—of him. Worse, she'd hurt him. She'd hurt someone she cared about.

Buffy wiped at her eyes, looking up just long enough to confirm she wasn't about to wander into oncoming traffic. She didn't know where she was going—where there was *to* go. Not back to Xander's, not with Anya there, and she wasn't sure she could stomach being around Willow, which ruled out Tara as well. There was the Magic Box, she supposed, though she would be surrounded with reminders of Giles

and her own stupidity. That left home—or the home that wasn't home—and Angel.

The thought of facing him now, saddled with the weight of her own failures and knowing he would do little more than fire questions she could not answer, convinced her feet to halt all over again.

There was nowhere. Truly nowhere. No place for her in this world.

The tears came again, stronger this time, riding on the coattails of a sob. And Buffy found herself moving once more, though she wasn't any clearer on her destination or if she even had one. Maybe she would just walk forever, or at least until her legs gave way and took her body to the ground, closer to the place where she belonged. The place she should never have left.

Why *had* she left? There had been the panic, the fragments of old memories and older fears. She'd gazed up into the wrinkled face of the Master, the architect of her first death, as he giddily tossed shovelfuls of dirt into the open grave, knowing the end was coming and terrified of what came next. That seemed so long ago, as did the panic and horror. She remembered that she'd laughed when she'd heard Giles announce her impending death because laughing was the thing she did when she couldn't scream.

Only a handful of years had passed between that moment and the one on the tower, when she'd looked to the horizon and understood the meaning behind her gift. There had been no panic then. Just calm understanding—of herself and her purpose, of everything Spike had tried to tell her one night in the alley outside of the Bronze. It had made sense to her as nothing else had, and every second she'd been back she felt like she had been searching for that moment of perfect clarity.

When she'd opened her eyes and found herself in a coffin, she should have just stayed there. Waited for death to roll around again and take her back where she belonged. Her time in this world had come to an end and she'd died knowing she had left it a better place than she had found it. Death hadn't been her finale but her reward.

Buffy drew in a shaky breath, once again lifting her head. She was in front of her house. Apparently, her feet had taken it upon them-

selves to make the decision of *where to go* for her and had brought her home. Only not her home. Nothing here was hers.

For a long moment, she stared at the front door, almost daring it to open. As though her loving husband had nothing better to do on a weekday than stare out the window for his wayward wife. Maybe he didn't. Maybe Angel didn't have a job at all—she'd certainly seen no evidence to suggest he did. Her throat ran dry as she again considered her options, as though the list had grown in the two minutes since she'd last gone through it.

As little as she wanted to see Angel, it was preferable to the alternatives. Angel at least had no love lost for this world's Buffy and, aside from throwing her a few questions that she couldn't answer, likely wouldn't spend a lot of time reminding her of who she wasn't. And maybe she'd get lucky—maybe he had no interest in talking to her at all. She was the one who had initiated the conversations they'd had thus far, and he had been seriously annoyed each time, like she was upsetting the status quo.

According to Angel, they only talked when Buffy had a criticism to level at him. Hopefully, the conversation they'd had the other night hadn't changed that. She could sneak into Dawn's room, close the door, curl up on the bed, and hope that, by the time she awoke, she had some idea of what to do.

Or better yet—she'd find herself back at Spike's crypt, in his bed, ready to start the day afresh. The needy, desperate, pawing woman she'd been before nothing more than a trick of the mind—a nightmare to ensure her rest was as fraught and painful as her waking hours.

There was a word for someone who attempted to force themselves on someone else—a word prowling the perimeters of thoughts, lurking there and ready to pounce at a moment's weakness. She managed to shove it back every time it came close, though she knew she couldn't keep it at bay forever. Soon, that word and everything else she'd managed to push back would overpower her and she didn't want to be outside when that happened.

She'd just have to chance it—hope that Angel would leave her alone or assume she was crying over something else when she crashed.

Buffy dragged herself up the walkway on legs that felt leaden, her

heart hammering harder the closer she got to the door. It wasn't until she was on the porch that she realized she didn't have her keys with her. Hell, she didn't have anything with her. Spike had been so insistent on getting her out of his crypt that she hadn't had time to do much aside from wiggle into yesterday's clothes and slam her shoes on her feet. Her keys, she imagined, were either on the weapons chest or somewhere in the lower level. There was also the suitcase she'd packed a couple of nights ago, though she wasn't particularly attached to anything in it, as the contents had been selected by a different Buffy. She pursed her lips, considered the doorbell—really didn't want to resort to it, as that would only lead to more questions—then wondered if this world's Buffy had kept the spare hidden in the same place she did.

There was a potted plant beside the door. Not the same one as the one at home, granted, but its presence there gave her reason to hope. Buffy knelt and dug her fingers into the soil, trying to ignore her tight chest and the way her hand seemed to tremble. It only took a second, she was sure, but by the time she felt the familiar grooves of the key against her thumb, it seemed hours had passed. She straightened again on wobbly legs, drew in a fortifying breath, and unlocked the door.

Turned out, all her concerns had been for naught. No one was home. She knew it immediately, that slayer sense kicking in. Vampires could smell people and hear their heartbeats, and slayers just intuitively knew things, she guessed. Wherever Angel was, it wasn't here.

Thank god.

It wasn't likely anything else would go right today. Or tomorrow. Or for days and days and days. And the relief at finding the house vacant was short-lived, accompanied by the reminder that he would have to come home sometime. She would have to speak with him sometime. Her friends would come calling sometime. Spike would...

Buffy closed the door behind her, trying and failing to stifle a fresh wave of tears. All her *sometimes* were claimed by versions of people she loved who didn't love her back. Or who only loved her because she was a version of someone they loved without question.

A version of herself who lived here, in a house devoid of her moth-

er's style or artwork, save a few small things that were less about aesthetic and more about practicality. The desk in the living room. The dining room table. The couch across from the television. The bits and pieces that had made this Joyce Summers' home were missing. No vases on the mantel or on the small table beside the armchair. No paintings on the walls, no spread of magazines on the coffee table, no knickknacks of any kind. The wall above the desk was taken up by a large black and white rendering of Buffy and Angel on their wedding day, similar to the one she'd discovered in her nightstand upstairs. She'd noticed it before, of course, the first night here when she'd crashed on the sofa, but hadn't thought much of it then. Just an image of a different Buffy, one with a beaming smile and love in her eyes, gazing up at the man she'd thought was her everything. A Buffy who couldn't conceive of a world in which she had Angel but was anything but happy —a world where she'd fall in love with a vampire she thought she hated.

What was it like to live in a house with an entire wall dedicated to her greatest personal failure? Why hadn't she taken it down? Why hadn't Angel? From everything he'd told her and what she'd seen, this was where he spent most of his time. A large reminder of what should have been the happiest day of his life was like cutting an old wound open every day, never letting it heal.

But then she knew, didn't she? He wanted her to say it. Tell him the marriage was over and that it wasn't just him who had given up on it. Take some responsibility for the fact that things hadn't turned out the way they'd thought it would. He wanted her to grant him his freedom, and as twisted as that was, Buffy understood it, too.

She'd told Spike she would break up with Angel if she was stuck here. Could she, using another woman's reasons? Or maybe she could just confess that she wasn't his Buffy and see if he would be willing to give their marriage a shot. Wipe the slate clean for them both and start over. The second the thought burst across her mind, she felt another rush of welcome relief, her heart skipping. God, that would be easy. Tell Angel that while this world's Buffy had fallen out of love with him, he had remained important enough to *her* that his presence in her life had been the linchpin in the wishes that had brought her here. The

most significant change that had informed everything else was his to claim.

But it was only a second, that thought. Then she came back to reality, surrounded by the evidence of how much she and Angel just didn't work. There was no reason to think that their problems would be any different from those with his original Buffy. That he resented her taking away his destiny, had somehow squandered all the life insurance money, shipped Dawn off without thought—those weren't things she could just overlook.

And she'd never once experienced anything like the peace Spike had given her. That night at the Bronze when she'd been confused and lost had been the single most explosive sexual encounter of her life, including the time a bunch of ghosts forced her and Riley to screw for hours on end. But it had been what came next that cemented something for her. How he'd seemed to know what she needed, made her feel safe and supported and loved—then, later, seeing just what lengths he would go to in order to carve space for Buffy in his life. Once upon a time, Angel had balked at the idea of her having a drawer at his place. Spike had remade his place to be Buffy's, top to bottom.

Even when they had been their happiest—whatever day that had been, she thought with a snort—Angel had never made her feel anything remotely similar to the way Spike made her feel simply by showing her how much he wanted her in his life.

She didn't want whatever she'd once had with Angel. She wanted what this world's Buffy had with Spike.

And she'd just done something that would ensure she'd never get it.

This time when the tears came, she didn't try to fight them. She couldn't. It was done—the worst thing she'd *ever* done, and she couldn't make it right.

Somehow, Buffy managed to convince her legs to carry her upstairs. She didn't know what she planned to do once she got there, but she couldn't stand in Angel's space anymore with the lie they had hanging on the wall. At first, when she reached the landing, she thought again about sneaking into Dawn's empty room and curling up on the bed, but her feet turned toward the room that should be her mother's. Or Willow and Tara's. There was something in there, her mind whispered,

that she needed to do. Or at the very least see. One more question in an endless series, but this one being something she could at least answer.

It wasn't until she was at the nightstand that she realized exactly what that was.

The keepsake box—the one she'd discovered alongside the photo of the wedding day that had never been. She wanted to see what was inside it. She still had no idea where the key was, but she found she didn't care. There wasn't much *care* left in her at all. Everything she'd touched had been ruined, so why not this?

Buffy pulled the box out of the drawer and settled cross-legged on the bed, and without waiting for second or third thoughts, pried back the lid, which gave with a whine and a hard *crack*. And when she turned her stinging eyes downward, she felt she must have known since he'd first mentioned it. There was no shock at her discovery, just acceptance.

It was full of letters. All from him. Organized in such a way that they told a story.

Beatrice—

Missing you something fierce. Think you can steal away tomorrow night?

- Benedick

Beatrice,

Think it went well. Talked you up as much as I could without sounding like I'm on your leash. Also, just so you know, I'm pretty sure that Lydia bird has a fang fetish. Spent the whole sodding interview making eyes at me. Not that I can blame her. I am a good-looking bloke.

- Your Benedick

Beatrice,

Had a thought. Would be a right shame if a certain little sister wandered into the Big Bad's crypt after dark. You'd have to come fetch her then. Maybe rough me up a little. You know, for show. Know you're a busy little soldier at the moment, but I'll take whatever I can get.

- Benedick

Beatrice—

Might keep that useless lump of yours indoors for a bit. His masterpiece is in town, aiming to turn him back to his old self and recruit yours truly if she can. Told her I'm not interested; she sussed out you're the reason right quick. But if she catches Sir Forehead out and about, nothing to stop her from turning him back into his big bad self.

Second thought, go ahead and let him out. Tell him to take long, meandering walks and the like. Preferably down dark alleys. At least then you could kill him.

Know you won't, though. Got to be the bloody hero.

- Benedick

Beatrice,

Thanks for letting that mad chit toss me out the sodding window. Had to let her close, didn't I? Couldn't tell her that the only girl I want was the one ignoring me unless her useless husband wasn't looking. Besides, he'd know if I hadn't come onto her. Appearances, yeah? That's what you tell me.

Though I think that bird might have been a robot. Did you get that impression? Be sure to tell me in person *so I can snog all that adorable jealousy right off that gorgeous mouth of yours.*

- Benedick

Beatrice,

Know there's nothing good to say to you right now so I won't try. She was a good lady, your mum. Better than this sorry world deserved.

Come beat me up sometime. Won't make you feel better, but I imagine it won't make you feel worse, either.

- Benedick

That sod doesn't deserve you and you bloody know it. You deserve to be happy and you know you only get that with me. Don't do this.—Benedick

Beatrice—

Get it through your thick skull. Not going anywhere. Don't care how many times you break my heart.

God, I miss you.

—Benedick

What makes it worse is knowing how much you're hurting. It kills me.

—Benedick

I do love you. Might not be the smartest thing I've done but it is the best.

—Benedick

It wasn't supposed to be you. Never you. God, why did you have to do it?

Don't tell me. I know why. It's who you are.

But it should've been me.

Beatrice,

You gave me a reason. If you were still here, I could kill you for that.

What you told me at the end was everything. Never got to tell you what it meant to me. Idiot that I was, I thought we had time. Thought I'd be quick enough, clever enough, to save the bloody day. Be the hero for once. Got in my head that it's that easy. Flipping the script, making the choice, doing the right thing, and all that rot. Like I said, love, I'm a thick git.

I'm going after her. Going to keep my promise if it bloody kills me. Not the sort of man who turns down a challenge. Getting her will be the easy part. It's what comes next that terrifies me. I don't want to do any of this without you. But I will. Man of my word.

Miss you so much I can barely stand it. You belong in the sun, not in the earth.

I love you. Today and tomorrow and forever and ever.

Always,

Your Benedick

Buffy lowered her hands, which were trembling too hard to do her much good, anyway. The letters she held tumbled back to the mattress in a haphazard arc. There were more pages in the box—those that had likely been penned after the resurrection, though she couldn't stand to read anymore—and even a few bits and scraps torn here and there

from those notes that hadn't been saved in whole. Each of them bearing the same words—*Love, Benedick.* Every time Spike had given her his love, this world's Buffy had saved it. Locked it up in a special place to keep with her always, even when she had to climb into her marital bed. She could see it plainly—the other Buffy's head on the pillow, her body positioned away from Angel so her face and heart were pointed in the right direction.

This was what she'd tried to steal at Spike's crypt. What she'd deluded herself into thinking she could fake until it became natural.

"You think it's that easy?" he'd barked. *"That you could just be a stand-in? That that's all she's worth to me?"*

Buffy swallowed, the pressure in her chest rising to the point she didn't think she could fight any longer. Instead, she choked out a sob and buried her face in her hands and gave in. First came the rush of self-loathing, that familiar bastard that had become even more familiar as she'd forced herself to keep moving forward. The inability to be Buffy, bounce back, give herself over to happiness and gratitude, fight her way through the pain as she always had. After Acathla. After Angel had left her. After Riley. After her mom. Whatever didn't kill her—and given that being resurrected was the opposite of being killed, she should be stronger.

But she hadn't been. And the world had kept turning, kept demanding, kept insisting, and she'd been trapped inside of it, clawing and desperate for something to make her feel anything like herself.

And look where that had gotten her. Trapped in a version of her world—one she'd destroyed without thought or effort. The Buffy who had kept these notes—these stupid, obvious, why-even-bother-with-a-codename notes—had been struggling too. Spike had told her so. She'd been struggling, but she'd been managing. Of that, Buffy had little doubt. It might have sucked but she would've clawed her way out with something more than a vague half-effort. She had someone.

Without thought or care, Buffy had ruined that. She'd ruined it for both of them—the version of her who lived here and the Spike who was her partner. All the thoughts she'd had before, the speculation of what the other Buffy might be doing in her world, went up like smoke, leaving behind a truth she'd been too bitter to recognize. Thinking of

this other Buffy as a different entity was a convenient way to create distance, but Buffy knew damn well how *she* would feel if she'd been plucked from her world and placed in another. It would be strange, perhaps even thrilling, but it would be a lie. Deep down, she would always know—her sister was somewhere else, missing and in need of rescue. The vampire she'd fallen in love with might exist on both sides, but their shared history would be lost. A thousand precious memories, even the ones that hurt, scattered and gone. And while Giles might be alive, he wasn't her Giles.

Picking up and starting over in a new world wasn't an option when it meant abandoning the people she loved.

There would be the temptation to ride it out, of course, to see if she could live with herself, but the answer wouldn't change. As hard as living was right now, she'd take difficult and real over easy and fake. And if this world's Buffy managed to work out that she wasn't in the right world, then she would fight with everything she could to get back. She would try and try and try until the trying killed her all over again.

Buffy was sick of trying. She didn't want to anymore. She was done.

That's when the thought arose, a solid thing amid a sea of uncertainty. Not triggered by anything, just originating like it had been there all along. Like it had been waiting for her to notice it.

Angel has a gun.

Buffy straightened, every inch of her going rigid with awareness. For a long second, she just sat with it. Let it linger in the space of her mind, see what would happen to the thoughts around it. The answer was nothing. Nothing at all happened. The thought didn't suggest or nudge or push. It simply existed, making an observation that could easily be innocuous. Nice weather we're having, you got a haircut, Angel has a gun. A piece of news that wasn't news—just a random fact among many. But Angel did have a gun and he had it in this room. Just a couple of feet to the left of where Buffy sat, surrounded by love notes that weren't hers, in a bed that wasn't hers, in a house that wasn't hers.

Angel has a gun.

Score one for random observations.

But it wasn't random. And, after a moment, she realized it wasn't

quiet, either. Not the way other random thoughts were—those that skated by, minute observations of everyday life that faded just as quickly as they materialized. It was like the word that had come to her earlier, ugly and abrasive, and it didn't move at all. Rather, it rooted itself in the foundation of her mind, forcing her attention to remain with it. Joining forces with that other word, which also grew louder until she could hear nothing else. Until her ears were ringing and her face had gone hot and her heart had taken off at a pace that hurt.

Thoughts that rooted were thoughts that became ideas, she knew, and this was no different. Soon, her mind was full of thoughts that were fractured and disjointed, split between the shock of what she was thinking and something that felt like a marriage of fear and excitement. The room began to spin, overwhelming her with possibilities that left her almost giddy with relief and terrified because of it. She'd been here before—dragged herself down the pathway of the easy out, just to remind herself that it existed should she want to use it. But it had always felt distant, roped off from everything else she had labeled *viable options*. Comforting to know it was there, carefully protected by the line she'd always thought she'd never cross.

But then, there were so many lines she'd always thought she'd never cross. What was one more broken promise?

Buffy turned her head just a fraction so she could see the nightstand out of her periphery and her heart somersaulted. It would be quick. No time for second thoughts. No more teetering, no more yo-yoing, no more mounting dread. What happened when Angel came home wouldn't matter. That she'd done something unthinkable—done *that word*—to Spike wouldn't matter, either. The edges of this world she'd crashed would remain unchanged, and if they did manage to bring the other Buffy back...

Well, there would be a mess for her. But a mess she was equipped to handle.

And before she realized it, before the idea had completed its journey to decision, she was moving toward the nightstand, opening the drawer, and there it was. Just as she had found it that first night, small yet intimidating, much like herself. Able to do a world of damage

with barely any effort, also much like herself. She wrapped her hand around the grip, hesitated, then pulled the gun out and into her lap.

It would be easy. It would be over. And that was all she wanted.

Buffy had never fired a gun. Everything she knew about guns came courtesy of James Bond movies. But then, she didn't need to be an expert—she just needed to make sure the business end was pointed in the right direction before she squeezed the trigger.

Her heart still hammering, she released a low breath, focused on the sensation of air leaving her lungs, of the way it sounded when it rode through her lips. The last two times she'd died, she hadn't had time to soak in that she was living her last moments, that she wouldn't blink or laugh or sneeze ever again. It had just happened, there one minute and gone the next. And then there again.

Not this time. She doubted even Willow would be able to put Humpty Dumpty back together again if Humpty Dumpty blew his brains out.

Buffy barked a hard laugh that dissolved into a sob. Her chest felt ripped open, vulnerable and exposed, throbbing with something that transcended pain. The steady, crippling weight of her mounting failures and regrets, the bad decisions that had led to even worse ones, dragging her across what had been not a perfect life but one well-lived. Well-lived but not well-died. Third time's the charm.

She closed her eyes and tilted her head back, then placed the cool end of the barrel along the underside of her jaw.

I'm sorry.

The next few seconds were a blur. She sat stranded between worlds in one, then knocked onto her side the next, under the weight of something snarling and heavy. It seized her wrist, its grip punishing and viselike, and twisted the gun out of her hand, all the while barking her name in a voice that sounded distant. Buffy experienced this in a time that was outside of her own, the weight of the vampire straddling her waist, the mattress whining and dipping, sending the notes she'd plundered in a scattered arc across the comforter. Spike spinning open the gun's chambers so that little missiles of death spilled down beside the overturned keepsake box. Then, as soon as he was certain it was

harmless, pitching the thing aside so that it clattered loudly and uselessly against the floor. And then it was just the two of them.

"Have you lost your head?" Spike snarled, seizing her by the shoulders and shaking her. But, she saw, coming back to herself by degrees, the fury in his voice didn't reach his face. His eyes were wide and terrified, his skin so pale his lips looked blood red. And he sat there over her, on top of her, his legs on either side of hers, his chest rising and falling like he had finished a marathon. He stared at her and she stared back, unsure what had happened or why, everything spiraling and nothing making sense, but he was here, and she was still alive.

He was here. He'd come after her.

Buffy blinked up at him and broke.

"I'm sorry," she sputtered as the world crashed back. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Spike. I—"

Everything tilted again, taking her with it. Then, somehow, she was on his lap on the bed, against his chest, crying into the cotton of his T-shirt. Crying but also not crying, for crying was something she'd done before. She hadn't done this, hadn't felt this. This throbbing sore within herself, raw and self-inflicted, made worse because she didn't know how to stop.

"I'm sorry," she said again, hating the words for being so weak. "I didn't mean it. I didn't mean it. I just wanted... I *wanted*..."

But that was as far as she got. Defining what she wanted was too daunting a task, almost impossible, and her stupid mouth had done enough damage.

As it was, Spike seemed to understand.

"I know, pet," he murmured, dragging her hair away from her sweaty face. "I know."

No surprises there. He always did.

14

I JUST LOVE YOU FOR THE THINGS YOU COULDN'T CHANGE, THOUGH YOU TRIED

EVERYTHING SINCE WAKING UP IN SPIKE'S BED SEEMED LIKE A dream. Or a nightmare. Definitely a nightmare. Or worse than a nightmare, actually, like something else had hijacked her mind and body, made her think and do things she would never think or do under normal circumstances.

Except she had done those things, thought those things, and blaming circumstances was an easy out—one she'd love to take but knew would be a lie. She just wanted something, anything, to point this feeling toward, much the way she'd hunted for a mystical reason behind her mother's tumor, desperate for a villain she could identify and take down as she did everything else. Now felt a bit like that, except the only villain in proximity was apparently herself.

"How did you get here?" Buffy asked, watching Spike as he snatched up the notes she'd scattered across the bedspread. She had no grasp of how much time had passed since he'd tackled her onto her side and ripped the gun away. Hours, it seemed, but likely just minutes. He'd held her as she'd sobbed out the worst of it, until she'd felt depleted of anything she could have once called energy. Maybe that had been his intent. Wear her down so much he could leave her without fear of what she might do in his absence. It was possible, but

somehow she didn't think so. He wouldn't have made the effort to come if it was just to leave again.

"Walked," he replied shortly.

"Sun's out."

"Never stopped me before."

No, it hadn't. But she also hadn't heard the front door slam or the air crackle with the telltale sign of a smoking blanket, so he likely hadn't taken a daytime stroll.

She thought for a moment. "Sewers?"

"Got it in one. Nice line goes right to your house. Dead useful the times I had to scarper before being caught by the mister."

"We've—you and Buffy have done stuff here?"

He gave her one of those half-shrugs, still focused on picking up the notes. "Not really. Place stinks too much of Angel to get my motor revvin', if you're wonderin'. But nights I walked the lady home after a night's patrol and he wasn't around, I'd steal a snog. Had to make a quick exit more than once—easier when you know where to go."

"So...why did you come today?"

At that, Spike finally paused and looked up, his brow furrowed as though he didn't understand the question. "Needed me, didn't you?"

Maybe she wasn't as empty as she thought. The words had her chest tightening all over again. Buffy blinked eyes that were already raw from crying against the sting of renewed tears. "I don't deserve that."

"Bollocks."

"What I did to you..." She pressed her eyes closed to keep from dissolving all over again. She knew it wouldn't work but couldn't help trying. "I don't have excuses. You were right to kick me out."

He said nothing for a long beat, then sighed and started rustling around once more. "Maybe. Also right to come after you."

"Spike—"

"It's over, Slayer. All right? It happened. We put it behind us."

Buffy's eyes shot open and she jerked forward. "We put it behind us?" she echoed. "Spike, that was the worst thing I've ever done to anyone. The worst thing I've ever done, period, and I did it to you. I can't just put it behind me."

He looked at her again, tilting his head. "Not with that attitude, I suppose."

"That *attitude*? Do you hear yourself? I—"

"I bloody well know what you did." At last, now, he sounded angry. Not furious, though. Not like he had been when he'd torn into the room. "Was there, wasn't I? Been there from the start. And yeah, pet, I wanted to rip your throat out."

She waited for him to say more, certain it was coming. That had sounded like the start of a speech, not the end of one. But he didn't continue, just shoved the last of the notes into the keepsake box and closed the lid firmly.

"Where was this?" he asked, holding it out to her, his tone carefully neutral. All of him careful, now that she saw it. His jaw was pulled tight and his expression guarded. Had he known that his Buffy had kept all his notes?

Buffy took the keepsake box, dropping her gaze to where the wood had cracked and splintered. "I broke it," she whispered. "Didn't know where the key was."

He nodded. "Can see that."

"I'm breaking all her things."

Spike released a deep sigh, sagging onto the mattress as though in surrender. "Your things, pet," he muttered. "All your things."

"They aren't mine."

"No one else here, is there?"

"Spike..."

But she didn't say any more. Couldn't.

Fortunately, he didn't seem to have the same problem.

"Been a right trip for you. All of this. You wishin' yourself somewhere better than what you had." Spike rolled his head back, sighing again, performing all of his uncanny human impressions. "Everything's on its head now, yeah? Got the world ripped out from under you. Makes sense you'd try to reach for a bit of cold comfort when it's offered."

"But it wasn't," she sputtered. "It wasn't *offered*. You told me you didn't want... That it wasn't enough that I'm Buffy. Spike, I... What happened at the crypt was rape."

Amazingly, as though she'd said something funny, he snorted, then looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "Been raped a time or two, pet," he said. "Didn't feel anythin' like that."

"What? Who—"

"Who do you think?"

Well, now that she'd asked, the answer was right in front of her. He was in his rapist's house, sitting on his rapist's bed. Like it was nothing.

"I didn't know," she murmured, as though that weren't perfectly obvious.

"Yeah, well, not somethin' I make a point to advertise, myself," Spike replied dryly. "Long time ago, that was. Puttin' the new boy in his place, make sure he knew where he fit in the family line. Point is, love, what you did—"

"What I did was no less rape than what he did."

He narrowed his eyes. "Yeah, it was."

"How?"

"Dunno. Just was. And bein' I'm the one it was done to, wager my say oughta be final, yeah?"

She scowled, feeling the familiar stirrings of annoyance, which surprised her so much she nearly jolted. That she could go from the place she'd been just a short while ago to a place as welcome and known to her as irritation with Spike made everything seem stranger. "So you really just want to forget about it?" she asked, setting the keepsake box aside. "That I forced you—or tried to."

"No sense dwellin'."

"It won't happen again."

"I know that. Also knew you'd be in a right state about it." Spike hissed out a long breath, slow as though he were trying to keep the reins on his patience. She didn't know when she'd come to know Spike well enough to determine his mood through the breaths he released, but she was certain she was on the money. Something only confirmed when he continued in a low undertone, "When I saw you with that... Fuck, baby, you nearly gave me a bloody heart attack."

She didn't know how to respond—to the words, the casual endearment, or the larger thing he wasn't saying. So she decided to be pedantic. "You can't have a heart attack."

"Tell that to the ache in my chest." He turned to her, and she was sure he'd never looked more serious. "Won't be a prat and ask why."

"And I guess I shouldn't be a prat either and ask why you stopped me."

He narrowed his eyes into a glare. "You know why."

"Because you don't know what will happen to your Buffy if I kill this body?"

"Because I love you, you infuriating chit." In a flash, he was back on his feet and towering over her, nostrils flared and eyes blazing. "You think I could stand it, knowin' that I'd sat back and let you die no matter what sodding universe you're from?"

"After what I did to you—"

"Knock it."

"No, I can't!" And then she was on her feet, too, at once infused with a shock of energy. Maybe it wasn't fair, maybe she should listen to him and just forget it, but forgetting wasn't in her blood. No matter what Spike wanted to call what had happened at his crypt—or what he didn't want to call it—she knew what that had been. What she had done. The word slithered under her skin, some place where normal water and soap wouldn't be able to scrub it out. And what was worse, she could still feel the desperation, the need to feel something other than worthless or empty or *other*, which was all she was in this world. Not quite Buffy. Close but no cigar.

"I can't *knock* what I did to you," she continued, her voice rough. "Believe me, I would love to. I tried to be mad at you, to blame you or tell myself it was okay because you're a vampire so who cares? Or that you were into it—you just didn't want to be. The entire walk from your place here, I tried and tried to just brush it off but I can't because that's not who I am." Her sinuses began to sting anew, and she cursed them and her frail human body and its frail human reactions. She'd already cried so much today the thought of shedding more tears actually hurt, but hell if that stopped her eyes from filling. "I don't know who I am. And I did. I remember knowing exactly who I was. It was so clear there. It was so clear and then I died and whatever...whatever Willow brought back..."

Spike moved forward and braced his hands on either side of her

neck so that she couldn't look down or away. "Bite your tongue," he said in a low rumble. "She brought *you* back. Every sodding inch of you is Buffy Summers. I'd know it if you were anything else."

She shook her head—or tried. He didn't loosen his grip. "Buffy Summers doesn't rape people."

"I told you—"

"It might not have been what Angel did, but it was still force. It was still something you didn't want."

At that, he didn't reply, but his jaw tightened like he was biting back something. And she imagined she knew what that was—that wanting wasn't the issue. The same as it had been when he'd awakened, hard and ready, body knowing all the right cues even if the player had changed. Or not changed, which made everything more confused than it had a right to be. But none of that mattered—all that mattered was that Spike had told her no, made it clear that only the Buffy who lived here with him would do. She'd known that when she'd rolled over, and she'd done it anyway, believing in some warped fashion that perhaps if he felt just how similar they were, the fact that she was a different Buffy wouldn't matter anymore.

Finally, Spike drew in a deep breath, seeming to have landed on the words he was searching for. "Don't think you've given yourself enough credit," he said slowly. "Handlin' it as well as you have."

"Handling what?" But she knew what—could see the answer there in his eyes, and she didn't believe it. "The Heaven thing isn't an excuse for anything I've done."

"You don't figure?"

"I shouldn't have come back from Heaven a *worse* person than I was before. I'm not all that hot on theology, but I'm pretty sure that's not the way it's supposed to work."

He dropped his hands, and though the pressure there had been cool against her skin, she still shivered at the loss of it.

"Right," he said thickly. "Not supposed to work that way, love. Not supposed to be a return trip at all. Told you my lady's had a rough go of it. Think this is anythin' she hasn't thought? All that rot about havin' come back wrong—things she tells me she feels, thoughts she has, how bloody angry she is with her mates about what they did to her. Bloody

hell, the nights she gets to stay with me, she wakes up screamin' half the time, dreamin' that she's back in that coffin."

"Has she raped you?"

Spike rolled his eyes, made as though he intended to grab her again, then took a step back. "Not the kinda relationship we have, pet. But I told you she's hungry for pain. The reason she started askin' for my fangs, innit? Thrown a punch or two, too, when it gets to be too much. Has nowhere else to put it, does she? Can't take it out on her chums and it's not like anythin' around here gives her a decent night's brawl. Was right horrified the first time and spent a good hour or so fussin' over me like I'm a bloody infant. Tell you what I told her—I can take it."

"You...let her hit you?"

Amazingly, he smirked. "Nights when she needs it? Fuck yes, I do. Though I get in a few licks myself. Needs a good tussle, she does, get all that pain out. Wager you do too."

"But..." Buffy blinked. "That doesn't hurt? The chip?"

He shook his head. "Intent isn't there to do her damage. Doesn't trigger for that reason, I expect. Besides, love, creatures like us? It's bloody foreplay is what it is."

"Creatures?"

"Just the way you're built," he continued, frowning, perhaps, at the waver in her voice. "Told me you used to sneak out to get in a good night's slay when Angel failed to give it to you good. Needed the rush to relax. 'Course, on your side, mighta been different. You—"

"No, I did." Countless nights she'd sneaked off to rush through the cemetery, leaving Riley none the wiser. Hunting, as she'd later told Giles. The drive hadn't necessarily worried her, but it also hadn't not-worried her. She'd known there was something out there she needed and she'd gone after it. And it had just gotten worse after Dracula, like he'd awakened something primal inside of her that had always been there, but curled up and docile until the moment his blood had hit her lips. "That makes me a creature?"

Spike's eyes softened with understanding. "Not the way you think. But you're not exactly like your mates, are you?"

"That's all I ever wanted to be."

"Buffy, you're not like them. You're... Fuck, you're bloody extraordinary." Now he did step forward, again lifting a hand, though not to force her eyes to remain on him. Instead, he ran his curled fingers along her cheek, exhaling a shuddering breath as he did. "Were before. Best I've ever seen, and not just talkin' your moves. It's in how much you care—what you're feelin' right now, awful as it is, you feel *because* you care. You care so much it nearly kills you. Been around for a minute now and I can tell you that's not somethin' I see a lot of. And that was before sodding Heaven, where you got because you're you. Gotta think bein' torn away from there, forced back here among us lesser mortals—or immortals—you'd feel like you'd been punished, yeah?"

Buffy felt her lip trembling, felt the rush all over again. "Did I—*she* tell you that?"

A sad smile tugged at his lips. "Didn't have to. See it, don't I? So I give her what she needs—whether it's a brawl or a shag—and love her best I can. All I can do. Remind her that this might not be Heaven, but it's all right, once you get past the smell."

The bark of laughter that tore out of her throat surprised her so much she nearly toppled back onto the bed. Would have, had Spike not caught her. She laughed again, startled at the sound, and wiped at her cheeks.

The look on his face was one of careful restraint, though his eyes were twinkling. "Don't have that where you are," he said. "Someone to do the remindin', that is. Been managin' all on your own."

"Not alone." She glanced at the floor, her smile dying. "I have you. Just...not like this."

"Well, one of the things you can set straight when you get home, yeah?"

"And if that doesn't happen?"

"It's going to, Slayer. Don't bloody care what Anyanka told us. You always find a way—it's what you do-gooders are the best at." Spike tilted her chin up so that their eyes met again. "Haven't forgotten that you blasted Dru's birthday gift to kingdom bloody come when that was supposed to be impossible."

"What?"

"Tall bloke, strong jaw, called himself the Judge? Stopped him right quick."

God, it felt like a thousand years had passed since then. Buffy snickered, though, feeling a spark of something. Not warmth, necessarily, but not all-consuming emptiness either. Not the thing that had haunted her on her walk from the crypt to where she stood now. And anything that wasn't *that* was something she'd seize with both hands.

"Right," Spike said, now looking around the room. "Anythin' you fancy grabbin' before we head out?"

"Head out?"

"Well, you packed up nice the other night but if there's anythin' else you want—"

"Huh? Where are we going?"

"Back to the crypt." He waited, arching an eyebrow. "Where'd you think?"

Back to the crypt. She didn't know why that surprised her, but it did. "Spike... No, not after—"

"Yeah, after. You think I'm leavin' you here with bloody Peaches and his gun, you're off your trolley." Spike stepped forward again, wrapping a hand around her elbow and pulling her toward him. "We're goin' back to the crypt. Gonna get some food in you and suss out where to look next."

"For the paw."

"That's right."

"And when we can't find it? Or when we find it and can't destroy it?"

He shook his head, not bothering to respond to that. "Look, we got lucky that your husband is out. Don't really feature tryin' to explain what you're doin' here in the middle of the bloody day and why his ammo's scattered all over the place, do you?"

She glanced to the mattress where the bullets had landed after he'd emptied the chambers. "Do you know where he is?"

"No, and don't much care." Spike arched an eyebrow and nodded toward the door. "If you've got nothin' else to collect, better skip on out before he comes home."

Buffy supposed there was no arguing with that, so she didn't try.

Instead, she offered a shaky nod and looked around as though a need would announce itself. There was nothing except the keepsake box, which she definitely didn't need to leave just lying around. She'd already made it easy enough to access by busting it open. "Umm," she said, scooping it off the bed, "maybe we should take this? Just...not to add to the fire, you know? I don't know if Angel is the snooping type, but he might become one if he doesn't hear from me for a few days."

Spike was still a beat. Then he swallowed and nodded. "Right," he said, his voice a bit scratchy. "Let's be off."

And somehow, that was that. End of the argument, resolution achieved. Buffy let Spike steer her out of a room she'd intended to never leave again, not whole but not quite as broken as she'd been when she'd gotten home.

He'd come after her. After everything, he'd come after her. He wasn't angry. He *understood*.

Maybe that was one of the benefits of not having a soul, though she couldn't say it was because he didn't care. All Spike did was care, and care, and care, and care, even when it didn't make sense. Even when it would have been easier, better, for him not to care at all.

But that wasn't Spike. Never had been.

And right now, this moment, Buffy couldn't say she wasn't glad.

SPIKE LEAPED into caretaker mode the second they arrived at his crypt. He didn't ask her what she wanted, just seemed to know intuitively, which would have to stop surprising her at some point. There was just so much about her, the odds and ends that made up Buffy that no one had ever bothered to learn. That he knew what she needed was a mindless distraction and what sort would do best; hell, that he even *had* a copy of *Clueless* in his crypt and would deign to watch it. That he scurried off to make her some popcorn the second after he'd fed the tape into the VCR. All of it without a word, not even a look to see if he was on the right track.

It was something else, being this seen.

Spike also knew the way she liked to watch movies—with full

running commentary. He didn't waste any time poking fun at the characters, remarking on the extras and noting who would be the easiest to pick off in a decent night's hunt. When she responded by throwing a piece of popcorn at him, he just winked and popped it in his mouth. Said that was the only way he could get her to share, identifying the characters most likely to snuff it if they ever took a walk in the real world. When he wasn't doing that, he was mocking how Buffy had affected Alicia Silverstone's valley girl talk, particularly when they'd first met, and how that had been a "right clever disguise," making him think she was another empty-headed Californian, even if he'd learned since then that blonde was *not* her natural hair color. This resulted in more popcorn being lobbed his way, which was naturally his intent, evil not-so mastermind that he was. Then he'd about made her jaw hit the floor by drawing comparisons to a Jane Austen novel, of all things—one that apparently he'd read more than once.

At that, he'd grinned. "Same look, you know."

"What?"

"First time I whipped out my book smarts while watchin' this flick, you stared at me all goggle-eyed. Enough to make a bloke self-conscious."

"It's just...you plus ancient chick-lit is not exactly a connection I'd make on my own."

"Oi, watch what you're callin' ancient, love. Mind tellin' me what exactly's wrong with bein' well-read?"

"Nothing at all."

"Didn't seem to have any trouble believin' that I knew Shakespeare well enough."

No, she hadn't, but Shakespeare had always seemed more universal and less gender-specific than Jane Austen. Not that Buffy had actually read any Jane Austen, though she'd tried, back before the days of slayage. Back when her mother had been at home more, not the sole breadwinner, and had time for things like book clubs. Joyce's club had covered *Pride and Prejudice* in conjunction with the airing of the miniseries starring Colin Firth, and Buffy had loved the idea of a bunch of friends gathering around to discuss a book. It sounded elegant, sophisticated, some bit of high culture she could add to her Hemery High

street-cred. Not only was Buffy Summers popular, she was also *smart*. That ambition lasted until she got to the actual reading part and suffered a quick defeat at the hands of confusing old-timey language.

Hell, she'd never even made it through the miniseries, which she'd attempted to watch on video after she and Angel had started dating and she'd had her "extravagant ladies of his time were way more sophisticated" crisis. But the miniseries was an exercise in dull—not only were there no vampires to speak of, but worrying about things like money and who-would-marry-who seemed really shortsighted, considering Buffy had a job that was literally do-or-die.

Needless to say, discovering she'd been an unwitting Austen fan since 1995 was a bit of a shock, not to mention a wonderful distraction. Buffy had managed to relax enough, listening to Spike point out various parallels, that she'd closed her eyes to focus on the rumbling of his voice, and not opened them until at least three hours later, when he prodded her shoulder to let her know he'd picked up dinner. It didn't hit her until she was halfway through her carton of chicken fried rice that he'd planned it that way—lull her to sleep with a movie so he could sneak off without fear of what she might do if left alone.

They didn't talk about any of what had happened until the wee hours of the morning, following a patrol he had insisted they go on —*"Gotta take it out on someone, sweets."*—and after he'd led her downstairs to the scene of the crime.

Buffy had followed. Arguing with him after he'd looked after her so thoroughly seemed rude, and part of her hoped she might be able to trick herself into just going with the flow as well as he was. But the thing she'd done lurked in shadows of her mind, waiting for a weak moment. Waiting to spring out at her and remind her just how badly she'd screwed up and how close she'd come to crossing the line she'd always viewed as uncrossable. The weight of the despair she'd felt while sitting in the bedroom she shared with Angel, holding his gun, more alone than she'd ever been—that wasn't something she could just walk off, and she knew it. Even if Spike had made sure to fill the hours in between then and now with as much *other* as he could to keep her from dwelling in dark places.

But then he surprised her again.

"Figure you'll need him tonight," Spike said, rising to his feet and tossing her the familiar fuzzy form of Mr. Gordo. "Keeps bad dreams away, yeah?"

Buffy just stared—first at the stuffed pig in her hands then at the chest that he had been rummaging through. "How much of my stuff do we keep here?"

"Damn near all of it," he replied, nonplussed. "Wasn't always like this. Nicked what I could from your mum's gallery that you wanted kept of her and the rest from the house, after your darling husband put it up for sale. He never bothered to ask where most of it had gone off to when he came back. Don't think he cared all that much." Spike jutted his chin toward the pig Buffy had now hugged to her. "Always meant to give that to Dawn. Never remembered to do it, though, the few times we managed to pull one over on ol' Hank. Was right brassed with myself about it when I couldn't find her again but worked out all right. Pig knew it needed to come home to you."

Buffy pressed her lips together, hoping to stave off a fresh breakdown. "Thank you."

"So, think you can get some kip?"

Maybe. Mr. Gordo was magical like that, could make anything feel normal. "Where are you going to sleep?" she asked.

Spike answered by stalking over to his bed and throwing the sheets back. "Same as always, Slayer."

"But... Spike—"

"Said it wouldn't happen again, didn't you?" He climbed onto the bed, then leaned his elbows on his knees and favored her with a look that was pure obstinacy. As though he were daring her...which of course he was. He knew her well enough to know that tactic typically worked. Something he confirmed when she gave a short nod and he smiled as though he'd won something. "Then we don't have a problem," he said.

"But—"

"I wake up tangled around you, pet, that's not your doin'. Can't promise I won't, but maybe the pig'll stand guard for that, too."

Buffy hesitated another moment, absently running her fingers

through Mr. Gordo's love-worn fur. "You don't have to do this," she said at length. "I can sleep upstairs or—"

"Or you can get your biteable arse over here before I drag you over by the hair."

It seemed too easy. It *was* too easy, and she didn't think it was supposed to be. Not after what she'd done. But she found herself moving forward anyway, clutching Mr. Gordo like he was her lucky talisman, and in seconds she was under the sheet with her head against the pillow. A full reset—one she didn't deserve.

She listened to the rhythmic lull of those unneeded breaths of his, which seemed to offset the frantic thumps of her heart. Then the question bubbled off her lips without waiting for her brain's permission.

"Why?"

She didn't elaborate, but then, she didn't need to.

"I love you," Spike said simply. "Always, Slayer."

Her lower lip began to tremble, and she felt the rush of new tears. The sensation alone exhausted her but she couldn't shove it back.

"Whatever you did, whatever you've done, you did outta somethin' dark and desperate," he continued a moment later. "And I know more about *that* than you ever will, even if most of the bad I've done I did 'cause it sounded like fun and I was bored." He paused. "You couldn't be as bad as me if you tried, and you love me anyway, evil bastard that I am. Or she does—the you that's not you."

Buffy drew in a shaky breath, a tear skating down her cheek, irritating against her dried-out skin. "I don't know how to love like that."

"Yes, you do."

That was all he said—all she said, too, and everything fell still as her mind detached from thought and feeling, succumbing to the sweet blanket of sleep.

❧ 15 ❧

EVEN THE THINGS THAT SEEM STILL ARE STILL CHANGING

She knew what to do when she awoke to Spike plastered to her back, murmuring low and rocking his hips against her ass. What she should have done the previous morning and the morning before but hadn't. It wasn't easy—he felt better than any man had a right to—but she managed to pull away from temptation, away from him, and he rolled face-first into the space she had vacated with a small *thump*.

If she hadn't been distracted by the strength of how much she wanted him, she would have laughed. Instead, she rose to her feet and tried not to shiver when cold stone met her bare skin. "Good morning," she said in what she hoped was a neutral voice. "Or...whatever time it is."

She turned to find Spike blinking at her through eyes that were still somewhat foggy. That only lasted a second, though, and then he remembered. It was an odd thing to watch happen, the moment knowledge reunited with consciousness, but he was too expressive to hide it. One second he looked blissfully confused, the next something between disappointed and resigned.

Another thing she hadn't expected—for that look to hurt so much.

Spike shook his head. "Did it again, didn't I? Tried to wake you up with a romp."

Buffy cleared her throat, glancing down. "Yeah, umm, Mr. Gordo is a lot of things, but apparently not the best chaperone. Sorry."

He dragged a hand down his face, snickering. "Yeah. Right inconvenience, that."

Maybe one day she would become accustomed to how dismissive he was about this—about everything. Then again, her ears were still ringing with what he'd told her before she'd drifted off, sentiment so sweet she thought she might start off the day by bursting into fresh tears. Somehow, Buffy managed a laugh of her own, one she knew sounded about as real as a promise from a politician, but he didn't call her on it, and for that she was glad.

"Same as we did before, you think?" Spike asked as he slid to his feet. "Wager if it's anywhere, it'll be at the bloody shop."

"Huh?"

"Information on where Rupert got the paw in your world."

It was too early for her to have to think, she decided. Granted, if the past two days were anything to go by, she'd probably slept past noon again. Spike was slowly converting her to vampire hours—more so than she had been already. "But he would've gotten the paw after he arrived," she said slowly. "Right?"

"Yeah, well, had to get it from somewhere, didn't he? Reckon a bloke like your watcher woulda had a list of contacts, or what all. Good a place to start as any."

She guessed. Maybe. It seemed like a long shot. Still, after yesterday, Buffy felt she was in no place to argue with Spike on anything he might want to do. Even if finding the paw, assuming they could, would get her no closer to her world than clicking her heels.

Though Spike had been right, too, when he'd reminded her that digging herself out of impossible situations was something of her signature move. And yeah, that version of herself, *that* Buffy, might feel a million miles away, but that didn't mean she couldn't find her.

That might have been the cheeriest thought she'd had since dying.

"Care for a wash-up, pet?" Spike asked, nodding at the tunnel that led to the makeshift Buffy bathroom. "I can get started on breakfast."

"Yeah. Thanks." She started in the indicated direction and caught

herself before she could make it more than a few steps. "Ahh, should probably grab clothes this time. Avoid any naked awkwardness."

Spike was rubbing along the back of his neck, his arm angled in such a way the mixture of shadow and light threw his muscles into sharp relief. He'd foregone a shirt again the night before, deciding he was safe enough in jeans alone, but apparently either ignorant or apathetic to the effect he had on her just from walking around half-naked. When her words hit, he snorted and nodded, dropped his arm, and nodded to something behind her. "Good thinkin'," he said. "Put your trunk by the bookcase yesterday."

She turned and, sure enough, there was the suitcase she'd packed what seemed like a long time ago. A quick look through the contents yielded a fresh change of clothes—an ankle-length skirt and a tank top—a clean pair of underwear and, well, no bra. Once upon a time, that would have been cause for concern seeing as her companion for the day was Spike, but things had changed dramatically. He wasn't trying to sneak peeks down her top anymore or doing whatever he could to put their bodies in contact.

"If someone had told me I'd miss that," she muttered, only to be swallowed by guilt the next moment when her brain bombarded her with images of what she'd done to him just yesterday.

He was fine now. She trusted that he was telling the truth there. It would be a while before she could say the same—maybe a long time. While the despair that had ridden her to Revello Drive had lessened from yesterday, she couldn't say it was gone. Only that she felt perhaps a little less alone, and thankfully a good distance from the line of thinking that had prompted her to place the barrel of the gun under her chin.

Though that was another thing she doubted she'd forget.

A half-hour later, and with her wet hair twisted and pinned to the back of her head, Buffy climbed into the main area of the crypt to find another one of her breakfast favorites at the ready. This one was more a comfort food breakfast than what she'd eat on a normal day—cinnamon sugar pop-tarts, the edges nicely toasted, and a tall glass of milk. And at home, she'd at least try to pair it with a banana or some-

thing. Make up for the empty calories, even if she'd earn them and more than that on the night's patrol.

"Thanks," she said absently, sinking into the waiting seat. "This looks...nutritious?"

Spike didn't even glance at her, just continued spooning up mouthfuls of what looked like blood-soaked cornflakes. She tried not to wrinkle her nose—she really did—but no matter how domestic she and Spike had been in the life he had here with her doppelganger, she couldn't imagine herself ever not finding the act of eating blood gross.

"Somethin' told me you'd be cravin' sugar, sugar," he said, wiping the corner of his mouth. "Eat up. We're burnin' daylight."

"Usually a good thing if you're a vampire."

"Yeah, well, no tellin' what sorts of creatures Rupert's contacts might be. Might not be keen to meet after sundown."

Buffy nodded and broke off a piece of her pastry, trying and failing to ignore the way something inside of her seemed to twist every time he betrayed his eagerness to send her packing. It was to be expected, especially after what she'd done—and aided by the fact that he'd now been told it was impossible—but the soft place she'd found the night before suddenly seemed farther away than the moon, only not quite as reachable.

There was also an undercurrent of dread that she didn't want to acknowledge. The thought of what would happen if they did find the paw and it became clear that Anya had it right after all. Buffy wasn't sure she'd ever get the ring of Spike's anguished cries out of her mind—that awful way he'd screamed and raged when Anya had taken the world away from him. That he had convinced himself that she had it wrong and everything could be fixed meant the next fall, if it happened, might be the type he couldn't walk away from.

They didn't talk on the way to the Magic Box this time, though Buffy did berate herself under her breath for her choice in footwear—sandals plus sewer equals yuck. Spike helped her step over the wider puddles, hiking her against him at one point to avoid disaster. When their eyes met, he snickered and shook his head, though she would have sworn she caught something almost fond on his face before he looked away.

It wasn't until they reached their destination that he broke the silence, and not in a way she would have expected.

"You should go home tonight," he said as he lifted the sewer grate.

Her heart skipped. "What?"

"Been thinkin'," Spike continued as though he hadn't said something surprising. "State we left your room in, havin' not heard from you in a couple of days, seem likely Angel's gonna think you're either touched in the head or in trouble. Only a matter of time before he comes knockin' to see if I can track you down."

"Why would he come to you? Why not the others?"

"Can bully me around a sight easier than he can Harris or the witches," he replied, stepping aside and waving that she should precede him into the shop. "Also, more likely to trust my nose than whatever spell Willow would suggest to track you down."

She didn't move. "Why?"

Spike furrowed his brow. "Git might be human now but I doubt he's forgotten what it felt like to be cursed." He tilted his head, then widened his eyes, realizing something. "Not tellin' you to stay there, Slayer, if that's what's got you lookin' at me like that."

"Like what? How am I looking at you?"

The corner of his mouth twitched. "Like I'm givin' you the boot or sommat. Really think I want you gone?"

"Well—"

"If I'm rememberin' right, I had to bloody haul you back to the crypt yesterday. Just don't fancy this bein' the way he finds out about me and the missus."

That made sense, but it also brought to light a bunch of things she had—until now—kept carefully guarded at the periphery of her mind, too overwhelmed with other aspects of living to give them any consideration. But these were things Spike needed to know, and sooner rather than later.

"Umm, the gang knows," Buffy said. "About you and me. Or your Buffy."

Spike just looked at her with that annoyingly impassive expression of his. The one she hadn't known existed until she'd come here.

"I didn't tell them... Well, I guess I kinda did, but your reaction at

Xander's when Anya said that the other Buffy was never coming back was the giveaway."

A muscle in his cheek twitched. "Right," he said. "Think I knew that at the time. Can't say I cared all that much."

"It wasn't just you, though. My story about us being in love in my world didn't pass the smell test, as Xander put it."

"'Cause why would Angel be here if you were so cozy with yours truly? Yeah, I was waitin' for one of 'em to smarten up enough and ask the obvious." Spike nodded and looked away, releasing a slow breath. Then he nodded again, though this time more to himself, and met her eyes once more. "Clock's ticking, then. Just a matter of time before Angel heads my way with a stake."

"They said they wouldn't tell him, Willow and Xander did."

"Uh huh. Thing about secrets, love, the people they don't affect don't treat 'em with kid gloves." Spike offered a smile, though. "Was always gonna come out one of these days. Might be what my lady needs to give him the boot. Or kick me to the curb good and proper."

"You think she would?" That seemed so unlikely with everything she'd heard of this world's Buffy and her relationship with Spike. The whole speech Spike had given her about the way she loved, how they loved each other—Buffy knew from personal experience that wasn't the sort of thing she'd let go without a fight.

"No," Spike said, grinning like he'd read her thoughts. "Still, you know how important it is for you to save face among your mates. Reason you didn't tell them about Heaven, yeah? Findin' out that their hero's got a scarlet *A* on her chest's liable to smart. Even more so when the bloke she's rollin' around in the dirt with is me."

At that, Buffy found she couldn't keep from grinning, herself. "Actually, they surprised me. They both did. Turns out they're relieved."

Spike's eyebrows shot skyward.

"They like knowing I'm not as miserable as they thought. Neither of them like Angel at all—which, Xander never has, but Willow was always my go-to when it came to gossiping about all things boys, vampires, and the difficulty of being in love with one who checked both boxes. Even after everything that happened junior year, she got it." Buffy shrugged, her turn to look away now because talking about

this with Spike was just weird. For her, at least, if not for him. "From what I managed to overhear, Xander even understands why I haven't told them about the affair. Admitting I was wrong about Angel would be of the huge."

For a beat, he didn't say anything, rather just stood there like he was trying to absorb this information, which he likely was. Even with what Buffy had seen the other night, how Xander had stepped aside so quickly to allow Spike entrance, there was a world of difference between accepting Spike as one of the gang and accepting Spike as Buffy's boyfriend. Or lover. Or...whatever they were to each other. Both of those terms seemed a bit lacking, given everything she knew.

"Good to know where I stand, I suppose. One up from bloody Angel." He smiled again, now looking pleased. "Anythin' else of note?"

Buffy hesitated but again figured it was better he learn now rather than later. "Willow's looking for other means to get me and the other Buffy to swap back. That's another thing—they think she might be in my world. That we might've switched places." She looked down, waited for another beat, then rushed on before she lost her nerve. "So your Buffy might be living it up in a world where she's not married to Angel, has her sister right there, Giles is still alive, and you're still in love with her."

A long stretch of silence consumed the beats between breaths, Buffy keeping her gaze fixed on the rather slimy concrete under her feet.

"They think she might not want to come back, is that it?" he said at length, his voice somewhat strained. "That she's happier over there."

"They thought it was possible."

"Mmhmm. What do *you* think?"

Buffy drew her lower lip between her teeth, inhaled, and forced herself to look up. She'd expected to find Spike studying the ground too, but he wasn't—his gaze was fixed on her, hard and unblinking. "I was mad," she said. "The thought that she might just...take my place. Which, I know, I'm one to talk. But thinking that the others wouldn't know or might maybe even like her more since she seems to be more together than I am... It hurt."

Spike didn't reply, just kept staring.

"I had a dream about it, actually, yesterday. That I showed up back home and there was another Buffy with my friends and sister. Then you—my version of you—came in and they started making out." She ground her teeth without meaning to, images of the dream dancing across her mind. Vivid images, not the usual sort that faded with time, giving it the same weight she normally would a slayer dream, except that she knew it wasn't. "I think the temptation would be there at first," she continued. "I mean, she wouldn't know that it was a different world—that it wasn't her Giles or her Dawn or her Spike. And if she did switch places with me, she has the monkey's paw right there. Maybe she'll think she subconsciously wished all of that into place. I dunno." She frowned. "But that's not true, either. I *do* know. I know what I would do, which should be what she would do. It'd be too good to believe—having everything just fixed like that. I wouldn't be able to just accept it, even if I tried. And once I found out I was in a different world, I'd want to find a way back."

At last, something in that imperceptible façade of his cracked, and she saw herself reflected in his eyes. The same uncertainty and fear that couldn't help but exist, even with all she knew about herself, coupled with its direct opposite. The part of him that knew her as no one else had—understood that all the things his Buffy might think or feel or try would be fleeting, because she'd know, deep down, it wasn't hers.

"I don't think she could leave Dawn," Buffy continued softly. "I couldn't—if it were me, I couldn't just accept another version of my sister when *my* sister needed me."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And..." She swallowed. "And you, Spike. I couldn't leave you."

She'd surprised him and she knew it. His eyes rounded, his mouth falling open.

"Spike over there loves me," she went on, slightly hurried now, her cheeks going hot. "So if she is there and she goes to him... I don't know that she'd *not* be with him. If she'd feel the same way you do. I mean, I think she would—think *I* would—once I realized I wasn't in

the right world and it wasn't just a spell gone wonky, and that there was a way to get back. But if she loves you and he's you, then he loves her too... God, my head hurts."

Spike chuckled, and the soft rumble surprised her. "Tryin' to tell me my lady might come back to me havin' shagged another bloke's brains out, is that it?"

"Well..." She wouldn't have put it in quite those terms, but the possibility seemed to be a good one, even if it made her stomach twist. "It could be, is all."

"Got yourself in a right little state worryin' about how to tell me that, didn't you?" He was still smiling, and his eyes were warm with affection she hadn't seen there since she'd told him the truth about who she was. It startled her so much she thought she just might burst into tears for how little she deserved it—and how much she'd missed it. "It's all right, Slayer," he continued, his voice equally warm. "The other bloke bein' me, I'm not too fussed."

"You're not?"

Spike offered that one-shouldered shrug of his, though this time he didn't look like he was trying to mask his actual feelings on the subject. "Not sayin' I love the idea. But it's like you said, right? He's me and he's over his head for you. Suddenly you show up lovin' him back? Don't think I could blame either one of 'em. She'd need somethin' she knows, some*one* she knows won't let her down, same as you did."

Well, that was certainly an even-headed view of the situation. "Even with everything you said about not knowing the difference? When you found out I wasn't your Buffy, you wigged. Hard."

Again, amazingly, he shrugged. "Put a stop to it, though, didn't I? Same as you think she will, once she susses out she's not where she belongs."

"I'm just guessing here, Spike. I can't know—"

"But you do. It'd matter to you, which bloke you were with."

Yeah, that was where she had landed the day before, sitting on the bed amid the notes this world's Buffy had collected from Spike. A whole relationship told over scraps of paper, a history that she wouldn't share with anyone else. It was the same thing with Angel, too.

A houseful of pictures she'd never taken, featuring her in a dress she'd never worn, smiling up at a man who—to her memory—had never stood in sunlight. The entire logic of the paw fell apart when pressed, but then she hadn't known what she was creating. That her wishes wouldn't just reshape the world she was in but send her to a new one entirely, with different versions of the people she loved living different-but-similar versions of their lives. The last time she could remember being deeply in love had been with Angel, and if she'd gone to another world then, run into another Angel, knowing that her Angel was waiting for her on the other side... There would have been the confusion she'd described, along with the temptation—especially if the barriers that defined their relationship were removed—but she couldn't just swap them out, like their history didn't matter. Another version of the man she loved would not be the same as the man she'd spent years loving, building memories with, called *Benedick* in love notes. Maybe if there was no one to go back to, if Spike were gone, for some reason, but alive in another world, she could see it then. But only then.

Spike had been right yesterday when he'd screamed at her that *being Buffy* wasn't enough. He'd also been right when he'd said the memories were what made them, so even if this world was brand new and all those memories implanted, it wouldn't matter to him. Those shared experiences still existed where it counted.

"Yeah," Buffy said finally. "It'd matter. Even with all the bad that's here, it'd matter to me a lot. And once I found out I wasn't in the right world, I'd stop whatever I was doing with that Spike for the same reason you did. And I'd probably beat myself up a lot."

"Silly Slayer needs to remember that beatin' her up is *my* job." He winked. "Honestly, love, think I kinda hope that's what happened. She's over there, tryin' to get her way back, but not alone."

Well, Buffy didn't know what to say to that, so she decided not to try. Even when her thoughts had been less charitable—that she could possibly weaponize the possibility of what this world's Buffy might be doing with her world's Spike to her advantage—she hadn't once considered that Spike would be all right with what he considered a betrayal on his end. Maybe that was more of the soulless vampire thing, or

maybe it was just how he loved. That the man she'd be with was another version of him would certainly help lessen the blow.

"My Spike will probably try to win her back if they are a thing and she puts an end to it," Buffy said.

"'Course he will if he finally got a hint of what he's been missing."

"Yeah."

That didn't rest well with her, either, as her subconscious had been so good to demonstrate with that nightmare. The thought of her Spike chasing around a different Buffy, pleading for the chance to convince her he was the same guy, that he loved her just as much and it didn't matter, had her chest twisting with something large and ugly, something that hurt. Maybe more so because she could understand it. If that was the way it had happened with this world's Buffy, then she would have given him everything he'd wanted for more than a year. Knowing that she loved him in return—knowing even a little of the life they shared in her world—would leave Spike starved for more. No need to switch places or return *his* Buffy to the right timeline. She'd be just fine on her own, stuck in a world much like his only better, by her estimation. Angel there to pick up the pieces, and if that didn't work, a Spike who was just as much in love with her, only the lucky prick had gotten the better end of the deal.

She could almost taste his disappointment, see how his face would fall when—if she managed to make her way back—he realized the Buffy who loved him was gone.

The ache in her chest intensified. For a moment, it was all she could feel, all she could focus on. Spike was pushing her forward into the Magic Box, then rustling behind her to resituate the sewer grate, and she was back where she'd started. Right where she'd started, only now facing the possibility that she was fighting to get back to a home where even the vampire who was in love with her would be disappointed to see her again.

"Right," Spike said, coming up behind her and pushing his way into the stacks of inventory. "Reckon we're lookin' for books, or what all. Nicked enough here over the years to know Rupert wrote down bloody everything. If he had a supplier or a lead, we'll find it."

Buffy forced a nod, wiped at her eyes. No need—she wasn't crying

—though she felt close enough to it that just the slightest thing would send her over. "Yeah," she said, trying for casual. "Umm, but what if it was with him? You know, on the plane?"

"What if it wasn't?" he retorted over his shoulder. "Could be old business, yeah? Someone he contacted before he packed his bags the first time."

"Yeah," she said again.

There must have been something in her voice, for Spike paused and turned to face her once more. Then, in a flash, he was right in front of her, tilting her head up so she was looking at him directly, his eyes even softer than they had been before.

"You feeling somethin', Slayer?"

She could have played dumb but that would get her nowhere, so she didn't. "I... Maybe. It hurts."

"What hurts?"

"Thinking...if I get back, that my Spike will be disappointed to see me. That he'll miss your Buffy."

He didn't rush to reassure her, not that she expected him to. Instead, he waggled his brows and dipped his chin. "Know the answer though, don't you?"

"Become your Buffy?"

"You don't need to *become* anything, pet. You're already her. And if you're feeling somethin' now, could be you give that a shot when you go back." Spike studied her face, brushed some of her hair out of her eyes. "He's gonna love you the same no matter. More, even, I reckon, if he gets to experience all of it with you, not just come in after."

"Really? 'Cause she seems to have it all figured out. Heart stuff, at least. I'm still a mess."

He chuckled, palmed her cheek, and that touch felt so good that now she did start to cry. Dammit, she'd cried more in this world than in hers and that hadn't been the plan, but it was also cathartic in a way. Crying meant feeling, and she was feeling a whole lot that she'd been numb to just a little while ago.

"Gettin' through the mess is what makes havin' worth it," he said. "Having's not enough for me—never has been." A beat. He looked away, considering, before meeting her gaze once more. "Could fool

myself into thinkin' otherwise, if she's there and loving him, givin' him a taste of what he wants, yeah. Wager it'll smart if she cottons on and puts an end to it. But if he could live knowin' that he had a chance to win *you* all on his own? That's what he'd want. The fight's what matters. It's what makes it real."

"So Spike wants to fight until I love him, huh?"

"It's why I sought out slayers at all," he said, nodding, not reacting to the dry note in her voice. Speaking as though she hadn't. "Fights I knew I could win were dull. Wouldn't be much victory in taking what another man won, even if that other man was me. I'd want it all myself. You come back to me as you are just now? I'll fight like I never have before."

He searched her face, and for a moment—a stupid, blind moment—she thought he would kiss her. God, she *wanted* him to kiss her. Not like before at the Bronze when she'd been another Buffy or any time since, but with full knowledge of who she was and who he was, and doing it because he wanted her as much as he wanted the woman who lived here with him. And her want was different too, divorced from pain or emptiness or desperation, far from the place she'd been yesterday when she'd tried to step into another Buffy's life.

That startled her more than anything else. She wanted Spike because she *wanted Spike.* Because he'd become important to her, and the uncertain feelings she'd been wrestling with before were transforming into something a whole lot less uncertain.

Spike did kiss her then, his lips grazing her cheek in time to catch another of the tears that had slipped free. He lingered maybe a beat too long, drawing in a deep breath and holding, almost like he was savoring something. Then he pulled away and refocused on the mess that surrounded them, and when he spoke next, there was nothing in his voice to suggest the moment had carried any significance for him at all.

"Suppose the best way's to work toward the middle, yeah? You go right, I go left?"

Buffy didn't recover as quickly, and he didn't call her on it, just waited until she volunteered a soft, "Yeah, sounds good."

And it did, just then. She needed to put as much space between

herself and Spike as possible. Needed to keep her distance and remember that just because he loved her didn't mean he was hers.

No matter how much that thought hurt.

16

TRYING TO BE FOR YOU WHAT YOU WANT TO SEE

GILES HADN'T TAKEN NOTES; HE'D TAKEN DISSERTATIONS. SALES records, inventory catalogs, wish lists—and that was just for the store. There was also his collection of journals in which he'd painstakingly chronicled every minute of his experience as a watcher, starting with his initial impression of Buffy—which she decided to find endearing rather than insulting—and ending with her death. He hadn't gone into too much detail there, though she supposed there hadn't been much time to journal toward the end. She'd chosen flight, then there had been a medieval siege and Giles had been dealt what could've been a fatal blow. Not to mention the ever-ticking clock counting down to Dawn's day.

And when the battle had been over and the world hadn't ended... Well, Giles had told her himself. Watchers found the business of their charge's deaths too painful.

Still, it was a little weird looking at that familiar writing, seeing in black-and-white what should have been the end of her story, and knowing it wasn't. Giles just wasn't there to write anymore.

That was becoming realer, too. The idea that Giles was gone-gone, not just this-world-gone, which she recognized had been more of a reassurance she'd fallen back on to distance herself from the reality

that was her role in his absence. Like everything else, it remained there in the background of her mind, gnawing on the soft edges, loudly quiet among the multitude of other sins she had committed. But there was no denying the reality that Giles had existed here at one point and now did not, no matter how alive he was in the life she'd left behind.

Buffy released a shaky breath, forcing herself to close the journal and replace it in the crate she'd been searching. Reflecting on the choices she'd made would only lead to another breakdown, and as tempting as that was, as much as it pulled on her, she knew she couldn't afford to give in right now.

"Oi," Spike called, breaking through the fog of her thoughts. "Think I might have somethin' here."

Grateful for the distraction, Buffy pushed herself off her knees and looked in the direction she thought his voice had come from. She'd lost visual track of Spike a few hours earlier, separated by numerous rolling walls of unsold goods. If it hadn't been for the frequent banging and cursing, she might have been able to convince herself she was alone down here. "What is it?"

"Looks like Rupert's little black book of little black magic antiquities," he said. "Things he wagered were cursed and in circulation, rumors he was chasin' and the like. Bleeding fuck, I forgot how small he writes. Those specs of his must've had a helluva prescription."

"Monkey's paw?" Buffy asked, squeezing between a stationary bookshelf and a towering cart of crystal balls. "Anything?"

"Lookin', aren't I?"

"Look louder. I don't know where you are."

She heard what was definitely a laugh in response, and Spike was in front of her the next instant, looking more than a little amused. "Those keen senses of yours could use some sharpening up, Slayer."

"Shut up," she said, and to her astonishment, she found she was grinning back at him. "My senses are plenty sharp."

"Think we'll have to test that before we send you packin'," he said. "Make sure you're up to scratch. Your Spike's a mite too lovesick, sounds like, to put you through your paces."

"He couldn't if he wanted to. Chip, remember?"

"Told you that hasn't been a problem for yours truly. Just remind

him that he doesn't actually want your head on a pike and you should be able to trade blows until you're ready to, well"—he grinned, a purely *Spike* grin that managed to both thrill and sadden her in the same stroke—"trade *blows*."

There it was—that rush of heat, the same she'd felt in increments around Spike ever since she'd come back from the dead. Only this heat was flavored with that other thing she'd felt earlier. The thing she'd been trying to distract herself from over the last few hours, hoping it had been a fluke or the result of mishmoshed thoughts and feelings brought upon by mental and physical exhaustion. Standing near Spike, being on the receiving end of his flirty smirk, watching as his eyes brightened, and realizing that the pull she felt for him was more complicated than knowing how good he could make her feel. That she liked seeing him smile and wanted to be the reason. Things she hadn't felt in a long time. A damn long time.

"You seriously talk about fighting like it's foreplay," she said before she could stop herself.

"And you're seriously missin' out if you think it's not." Spike tilted his head, favoring her with another of those bone-deep penetrating looks of his. "We have it out in the sun in your world, too? Before you shipped the gem off to your wanker of a husband?"

"He's not my husband."

"Ring on your finger says different."

She blinked and glanced down, almost as surprised to find the diamond shining up at her as she had been that first night. Had she seriously been wearing it ever since she'd arrived? "Huh," she said, lifting it to her face. "Tell me the truth—have I dusted a vamp by decapitation with this thing? 'Cause if not, I'm gonna have to cross that off my list."

Spike snorted but nodded his approval. "Think I'd like to see that."

"Of course you would," Buffy replied. Then she lowered her hand and met his gaze again. "But I stand by it. He's not my husband. I didn't marry him."

"Think you'd have a time convincin' him of that, pet," Spike said. "And you didn't answer the question."

"What question?"

"Did we dance in the sun where you come from?"

While her memory was a bit foggy, Buffy was pretty sure this was the second time she'd heard Spike refer to fighting each other as dancing. She had a vague sense of being outside the Bronze, begging for patience and trying to keep her revulsion at bay as Spike relished in gory details of his gory past. He'd said something about dancing all night with one of the slayers he'd killed, which had stood out. *Dance* wasn't a word she'd ever associated with fighting.

Though now that she had the distance of both time and death separating that moment from this one, not to mention a whole host of feelings she was trying to ignore, Buffy could admit that Spike had had a point. Their fights had always seemed a step above the normal brawls that kept her occupied. There had always been something more, something extra, about fighting Spike that engaged her slayer senses the way no other vampire ever had.

But those thoughts were dangerous. Better she just answer his question and move on. "If you're referring to the time you decided to make your ring collection even tackier than it already is, yes, that did happen on my side."

"Mhmm." Spike rocked a bit on his heels, and it was impossible not to notice the way his eyes seemed to twinkle with excitement. "Gonna tell me that wasn't foreplay, then?"

Well, so much for avoiding dangerous thoughts. "Excuse me?"

"Way I remember it, you rubbed your pert little arse all up against me. It was enough to give a bloke ideas."

"I so did not."

"Come on, Slayer. No one here's gonna judge you."

He leaned closer, and she knew she should step back, but god, she couldn't. And he shouldn't—he shouldn't be doing or saying anything like this, especially with what had happened. Except this was Spike, and Spike always had been lewd, inappropriate, and full of flirty innuendo dressed up as insults. She was the one reading too much into it, or trying not to, at any rate.

"Happen to know for a fact that you know exactly what I'm talkin' about," he said in a low rumble. "That's one fight my lady has insisted on repeating, only with a more satisfying conclusion."

Buffy cleared her throat, and this time when she commanded her feet to move, they listened to her. She stumbled back a few steps, her heart beating faster than it should, her cheeks warm enough that she knew he'd caught her reaction. Caught and was rather pleased with it, if his smirk was any indication.

"Could you stop?" she blurted.

"Stop?"

"With the bedroom eyes and voice and foreplay talk?"

Spike arched an eyebrow. "To be fair, love, you're the one who mentioned foreplay." He paused, though, and something seemed to occur to him. "It bother you?"

"It should bother *you*. Aren't I the wrong Buffy?" And that wasn't even the point. "With what I did... I know you said you're fine and are all with the moving forward, but it's just...not easy."

He opened his mouth, closed it, a shadow crossing his face. "Weren't kidding, were you?"

"About what?"

"You are feelin' something."

Even if she lived here for a thousand years, Buffy didn't think she could get used to Spike saying things like that with almost clinical interest. Nothing at stake for him—he knew where he fit in this world and with his Buffy. No reason to wonder what would happen to the Buffy standing before him if they did manage to find a way to get everything back the way it was supposed to be. Would he think about her at all, if she left? Or would the span of days she'd spent here be written off as nothing more than a bad dream—one that had been decent enough to end.

"This isn't awkward or anything," she managed after a beat, trying to grin but feeling it came out more a wince. "I'm not mortified."

Spike made to step forward, then caught himself and brought up his hands. "Sorry," he said, sounding less sure of himself. "I... Bugger, I didn't mean to make you feel—"

"Mortified?"

"Just took me by surprise, is all."

He didn't say anything else, and she was grateful, but he did put more space between them, and she was grateful for that too.

And for a moment, they just stood there like that. Spike eventually pulling his gaze from hers to resume flipping through the journal as Buffy tried to ignore how hot her face was, how every inch of her seemed attuned to every inch of him. Not just attuned—drawn. Like her skin needed his skin.

She'd felt like this before, what seemed like a million years ago. Stealing kisses with Angel under a night sky, pretending to listen for the rustling of disturbed graves while seriously hoping the local vampire population would cut her some slack. That had been all forbidden—vampire plus slayer plus a guy she knew her mom wouldn't like and Giles definitely didn't approve of. The trifecta of ensuring she behaved exactly as everyone feared she would.

This thing with Spike was different. It felt somehow deeper than what she'd experienced with Angel, perhaps because of all the making out they weren't doing and all the talking they *were* doing instead. All the ways Spike knew her or saw her, even when she was at her worst. How he cared still despite the things she'd done—despite how much she'd fucked up his life. That he was here with her at all made the shift in her feelings for him scarier, realer, because there was no cushion, no lurking sense of something she didn't know. All the worst parts of Spike were on display, had been since they'd first met. These parts he was showing her now were the ones he'd kept sheltered. More than that, they were the sort that built real relationships. The type that lasted.

When he did speak again, it was as though the previous conversation hadn't happened, even if there was a rigidity in his voice that hadn't been there before. "Listen to this," he said, holding up the book he'd unearthed. "'Progress on MP. Information from Olivia has indeed yielded results. I established contact with Mr. J. Singer. While he has confirmed possession, he is disinterested in selling.' And a number."

"Olivia?" she asked, for want of something to say.

"Rupert's old shag friend, if memory serves."

Buffy wrinkled her nose. "I must have blocked that out on account of *gross*."

"She was all right, even if her taste in men was rubbish," Spike replied, grinning slightly. "Fancy givin' this Singer fellow a ring?"

"It didn't say anything about a paw."

"No, but MP can only be so many things, can't it?"

She supposed not, and it was the best lead they'd had thus far. Also, it would give her something to do aside from stand here and ruminate on her evolving feelings for Spike. "I don't know if the phone upstairs works," she said. "Or if there even is a phone upstairs, actually. But there's a payphone not too far from here, so yeah. Might as well."

She inhaled, averted her eyes—suddenly certain all of the confused things going through her head were on display—then edged her way around him. Or rather, she tried to. The close quarters meant that getting around anything required excessive body contact, and in seconds, she found herself attempting to scrape by without looking at him, even as her pelvis dragged along his, her hands flailing to find a safe place to land. They lasted hours, those seconds, excruciatingly drawn out so that she was aware of every breath she took and the frantic pace her heart had set. And she knew he knew it too—his vampire senses cluing him into every minute betrayal her body committed, how she trembled when she had to stabilize herself on his chest, and more still when she brushed against what she knew *wasn't* a stake in his pocket. Buffy was redefining *awkward* every other minute with Spike, but this one might take the cake, knowing that her actions would seem intentional—her rubbing up against him after having tried to force him into fucking her and admitting she felt something. And there was nothing she could say to address that without making everything worse.

"I should've just waited for you to turn around," she muttered once she was safely on the other side. "I... Sorry."

Spike didn't reply, thank *god.* The weight of his stare was enough. She couldn't take his teasing too.

Focus, she told herself and pushed forward. *Right*. Phone. That was what she was looking for—why she'd just climbed over Spike like a crazy woman. Either a phone upstairs or the payphone on the corner of the street.

Personally, though, she hoped there would be no need for a payphone. Aside from it still being daylight out—even if the sun was on its way down—Buffy didn't want to exit the Magic Box just yet,

especially if this lead turned out to be a dud. Once they left the premises, it would be easier to rationalize calling it a day in terms of the ongoing search, and then she would have to face Angel. Unless Spike had changed his mind there, and she doubted he had. No amount of weirdness between them at the moment would make what he'd said earlier any less true. The longer she put off talking to Angel, the better the likelihood that he would swing by to borrow Spike's nose to track her down, and that would open up a whole new can of worms.

Still, Buffy hadn't figured what she intended to tell him—either about herself or the mess of bullets she'd left on the bedspread. Her only comfort was knowing she wouldn't have to stay beyond her explanation. Of course, Spike might decide to take her recent weirdness as a reason to rescind the offer to bunk at his crypt another night, and she couldn't say she'd blame him if he did. Their sleeping arrangements were already uncomfortable enough.

She'd be just fine at a motel, she knew, though the thought held little appeal.

One thing at a time. Paw now.

Buffy made her way upstairs, managing to avoid knocking anything over in the process. Weak light poured in through the windowpanes, enough to tell her that successful phone call or not, it was likely nearing time to quit anyway. Much as she loathed the prospect.

The most likely spot for a shop phone was behind the cash-wrap, and lo and behold, she found it tucked inside one of the cubbies, still wired and everything.

"We're in business," she told Spike as he joined her, though still carefully not looking at him. "Phone number?"

She tried to take the book without touching him but managed to graze his finger with hers anyway. The breath that whooshed out of her was a bit more audible than she would have liked.

Get a freaking grip.

"All right, Slayer?"

"Peachy and chock-full of keen," she said in her brightest and fakest voice, then turned her attention to the words scribbled on the open page. Spike was right—Giles's writing was on the minuscule side. Look

at it too long and *she'd* need glasses. After squinting and focusing on the relevant part, Buffy took a deep breath, muttered, "Here goes nothing," and punched in the numbers.

There was a beat, a couple of clicks, then a long ring. She twisted the cord around her finger to keep herself occupied—keep from shooting a glance Spike's way or doing anything else that might make her earlier awkwardness even worse. Another ring. And another, each drawn-out tone shoving down that vague not-calling-it-hope sensation until it barely blipped.

Just as she was about to give up, a gruff, somewhat snarly voice filled her ear. "Hello?"

Buffy jumped, looked quickly to Spike before she remembered she'd been avoiding his gaze. "Hi," she said. "Is this Mr. Singer?"

"Depends," he answered, and this time she heard the accent—the country sort she'd always associated with the middle-to-lower States. "Who the hell is askin'?"

"You don't know me, but I found your name and number among the personal effects of Rupert Giles. He—"

"Mr. Giles?" The gruffness vanished almost at once. "The British guy? I've been tryin' to reach him for days now."

"You have?"

"Hell yeah, I have. He told me to call him if I changed my mind. Well, I did. God almighty, did I change my mind. But he ain't ever picked up."

Buffy's heart performed a somersault. Logically, she knew she hadn't been looking for the paw all that long. Illogically, these last couple of days had stretched for centuries. That she might actually find it had started to seem little more than a pipe dream. As such, she was careful to keep the excitement out of her voice when she continued. "Change your mind about what?"

"The damn paw, that's what." He was back to being snarly. "What else would you be calling about?"

Spike rolled his eyes and snatched the phone out of Buffy's hand before she could protest. "Look, mate," he snapped. "Rupert kicked it a couple weeks back, so why don't you just start at the bloody begin-

ning? You have a monkey's paw you want off your hands. We're in a mind to buy. Cough up."

It was times like this that Buffy regretted super hearing was not on her list of slayer enhancements. While she could make out a word or two, the twang and bite in the man's voice made it hard to follow. Not that the story seemed particularly riveting, if Spike's reaction was anything to go off. He grunted here and there, pinched the bridge of his nose, actually growled once or twice—though the man on the other end apparently didn't notice—and made a bunch of other tried-and-true sounds designed to keep someone talking. They worked.

"Where are you?" Spike asked at last, meeting her eyes again. "Outside Vegas. Right. No, the lady and I'll be by tomorrow to collect."

"We will?" Buffy mouthed at him, furrowing her brow.

"Yeah. That's right," he replied. Then scowled. "How much? Mate, you're off your bloody rocker if you think—I don't care what Rupert offered you. Story's changed now, hasn't it? You want rid of the thing, we aim to do you that service. Unless you fancy it fallin' into someone else's—right, thought so. We'll ring tomorrow." Spike hung up before Mr. Singer could go on yet another diatribe and pressed his palm to his brow. "Tell you, love, if it weren't for this bleedin' chip, I'd off this berk on principle."

"We're going to Vegas?"

"Just a stretch down the road. He wanted to put it in the mail. Not exactly keen on givin' this thing another chance to pull a vanishing act. Safer to pick it up in person."

She supposed that made sense, though she felt a bit whiplashed at how quickly it had happened. "Okay," she said. "And...how are we getting to Vegas? I don't exactly have a car and my driving is... Well, the less we say about my driving—"

"Believe me, pet, I've had the pleasure of seein' what you can do behind the wheel. Even for a dead man, once was enough."

"I've driven you somewhere?"

"More I was aimin' to give you lessons and decided it was a lost bloody cause." Spike chuckled, and she tried hard not to enjoy the sound too much, deep and rumbling as it was. "Ran a few scenarios

back after Glory turned me into a blade sharpener—how we might just grab the Nibblet and scarper right on outta town."

"Right," she said, the memories filling in now. "And you stole a Winnebago."

"I did what now?"

"Oh, did you not do that here?"

"Nick a bloody boat on wheels? Now that you mention it, no. Why the sodding hell—" But he stopped, and something behind his eyes went bright. "Right. Took the whole crew, didn't you? 'Course you did. Buffy Summers leaves no man behind, and all."

"Except apparently I did leave people behind if you went for something less boaty over here."

"Never made it to the road, did we? One turn around the parking lot in the DeSoto was enough to put you off the idea."

"The de-what?"

At that, he fairly stared at her, his mouth slack with shock. "Bugger, you tellin' me I don't have my sodding wheels in your world?"

Buffy wrinkled her nose, struggling to remember. It was one of those things that sounded right, but she didn't have a memory to associate with it—not a readily available one, at least. "You, uhh, have a motorcycle," she said. "Now, at least. Stole it from a demon, I think. If there's a car, I don't know about it."

Spike relaxed a bit. "Makes some sense, I wager. Nowhere to park the bloody thing when you hang your hat in a sodding graveyard. Would be dead useless as a getaway car, too, if we aimed to make tracks."

"So you have a car?"

"Mhmm. Haven't been for a joyride in a minute, seein' as everythin' in Sunnyhell's within walkin' distance, but a bloke I play cards with keeps her for me for a couple kittens a week."

If that sentence was supposed to make sense, well, it failed. But Buffy wasn't sure she wanted to know what he meant by kittens—maybe it was British slang for money, the way *fag* meant *cigarette* and *lift* meant *elevator*, though somehow she didn't think so. Most of Spike's slang was somewhat familiar to her, courtesy of Giles's increasingly absent filter, and she had yet to hear

the word *kitten* in any context that would suggest one wasn't discussing a cute little furball with claws.

"So, that's how we'll get there?" Buffy asked a moment later. "Your car?"

"Unless you have a better option, yeah. She's got some age on her but she'll get us there good as anythin' else." Spike tilted his head, looking at her now like he was trying to work something out. She wished he wouldn't. He was already too perceptive for his own good when he wasn't trying to be, and factoring in her earlier case of verbal diarrhea, combined with how she'd practically given him a lap dance when she'd tried to get past him, he knew too much already. That was mortifying enough.

"We have a deal, the Slayer and me," he said after a beat. "I get to keep one for myself. Rest go to a shelter. Well, the ones I don't owe other blokes, at least."

"Huh?"

"Kittens." When she didn't say anything, he sighed and rolled his head back. "Look, they're a bloody nuisance as it is—damn felines runnin' feral all over town, poppin' up new litters every other day. Just turns out they're a crowd-pleaser across species. Better than the swill Willy serves vamps and, stringy or not, the meat's good for a number of other—"

"You're really justifying the slaughter of kittens to me."

His mouth twitched. "Keeps the population down and your nastier demons fed. Not gonna plead my case to you, love. My Slayer's already got me by the bloody stones where those little blighters are concerned."

"So why bother explaining at all?"

"Could tell it was gonna weigh on you." Now he smiled, a kind smile, one that brightened his eyes and made her heart both swell and ache in the same stroke. "Protector of innocents across the bloody board, you are. Even little attack muffins."

A laugh of pure surprise burst off her lips before she could stop it. "Attack *what*?"

"Somethin' you called them once when you tried to set free the lot I had on hand and got a nasty scratch as a thank you."

Buffy glanced down. She didn't want to, but she saw it—saw it as she had seen so many other things. Snippets of another life she'd lived, complete with laughter and inside jokes and compromises over kittens and a bunch of other things. How it seemed so normal and *good* when just a few days ago, she had been warring with herself over the draw she felt toward him. Trying to keep her emotional distance if not her physical one, wishing she could feel any of what she felt with Spike with someone else, *anyone* else, to make it something right. Normal wasn't a thing she would ever have—being raised from the dead after jumping into a hellgod's portal kinda drove that home, and that realization had contributed to the suffocating feeling she'd tried to outrun by making those wishes—but everything Spike shared with her about what he had with his Buffy gave normal a new shape. There was *other people* normal and there was Buffy normal.

And if she managed to get home... God, she didn't know where she'd start. How Spike would react if she told him she was feeling something—how she could begin to build that into what she wanted. If the shadows of this world's Spike and Buffy would chase her forever, set a standard she couldn't match because she was still fundamentally broken.

A loud *bang* crashed into her thoughts—thank god, seeing as they weren't exactly cheerful. Buffy whirled around just in time to see Willow stroll through what should have been a locked door with apparent ease. And just like that, everything shifted again, recentered on the issue at hand, reminding her that worrying about hypotheticals that might never get the chance to come to pass was a wasted effort. She had a world to get back to first.

"You're here!" Willow said, relief flooding her face. "Well, that makes this easy. I was hoping I wouldn't have to do a locater spell, seeing as my supply's on the low side since you closed up—or Buffy closed up shop."

Worrying about magical supplies seemed a bit shortsighted at the moment, but she decided not to argue the point. "You've been looking for me? Does that mean you've found—"

"Dimension search is ongoing," Willow said, now a bit chagrined. "I'm having more trouble with it than I thought I would, actually."

Spike took a step forward, all talk of kittens clearly forgotten. "But you'll do it. You'll find the other world—her world. Get our girl where she belongs."

There was no mistaking the edge in his voice—or his eyes. Every inch of him had gone rigid.

"Wow." Willow stared at him, looking a bit dazed. "I mean, I knew—Xander kinda spilled the beans all over the place but there's knowing and *knowing,* ya know? You and Buffy are..."

Spike narrowed his eyes at her and made a noise that, if it wasn't a growl, was a close relation.

Apparently, Willow thought so too, for she shook her head and started talking fast. "We're not giving up. No, siree. It's just...when we did it with Anya, there was a unique item to focus on—something she left there that wouldn't be in any other world, since that was a world she created. Not so much the case here."

Buffy's heart skipped again. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not even sure I follow it, to be honest," Willow said, inching away from Spike when he tensed even more. "It comes down to some really nitpicky magic. Anya made the other world—the magic came from *her*. You made this world but the magic didn't come from you specifically. There was an amulet that Anya lost in the other wacko world that we could use as a tether to try and find it...but you and our Buffy are identical, so..."

"So there's nothing specific to search for," Buffy surmised, her tone going flat. The sensation hadn't existed long enough to be called hope, but the crash felt just as familiar. "Oh."

"But we're still looking—Tara and me," Willow said again. "And now Anya is helping too. She knows all about... Well, you know. Between the three of us, we'll find a way. I know it." She glanced at Spike and put another step between them with a nervous little titter. "I'm actually here because of Angel. He's, ahh, been looking for you. Called Xander a couple of times and actually showed up at the dorm to see if Tara or I knew anything. He's kinda wigged and I figure it's just a matter of time before he goes to Spike for help. He wanted me to do a location spell but, again, I'm short on supplies so I was hoping I could

just process-of-elimination this until I found you. The crypt was my next stop."

Well, that did it. No chance in wiggling out of seeing Angel tonight.

"Not sure how that one ever reckoned he could make a career as a detective," Spike said, and she was relieved to hear he sounded a little less growly than he had a moment ago. Not calm, but not about to fly off the handle, either. "Slayer's been diggin' around here for days now. You'd think that'd be the first bloody stop."

Willow gave a half-shrug. "I think he said something about having come by, but everything being locked up, he had no way in and Buffy took her keys with her." She turned back to Buffy. "So...if you're not going home, you should probably tell him. He's definitely agitated about something."

"I was planning on it," Buffy said, forcing a smile. "Thanks for the heads-up."

"What I'm here for," Willow replied with another shrug and a strained smile of her own. "You two find anything here?"

"Yeah. Took all bloody day, but we finally hit paydirt," Spike said. "Think we found who Rupert bought it from in her world. Bloke still has it and is keen to be rid of it. We're hittin' the road tomorrow."

The redhead brightened at that. "Oh, excellent!"

"Do you think it will help what you're doing? Having the paw?" Buffy asked.

"Well, it certainly couldn't hurt. It has its own magic that I might be able to tap into. *Might*," she added, this time with a pointed, however nervous look at Spike. "I make no guarantees, but the more help I have, the better. Let me know when you have it."

"Trust me, Red. Anythin' that might get her back to me, you'll be the first to know."

And there it was again—the fall back to earth. The fierce determination in Spike's voice was no less than she would have expected, but damn, it still managed to hurt. More than that, it brought her right back to where she'd been before—where she'd been all day. That awkward place of knowing she was stealing moments that didn't belong to her, reaping the benefits of someone else's life.

She shouldn't take Spike's eagerness personally but *shouldn't* did little to stop her. Just reinforced how very alone she was, and how much her departure from this world would be celebrated.

Even after everything, even knowing she deserved it, the knowledge couldn't help but hurt.

IT WAS STRANGE, returning to a place where she had nearly killed herself.

Buffy stood on the porch for a moment, trying to temper her rising sense of panic. She didn't know what she thought would happen when she walked through the door—that she might lose control of her body and race back to the bedroom to finish the job she'd started. Both she and Spike had decided it was best for him not to accompany her, though she was fairly certain he'd followed her anyway. The tingle at her neck that screamed *vampire* had been a pleasant companion her entire walk back. Not threatening, just there. That was the way it had started with Angel, once upon a time. Eventually, she'd come to know his specific tingle, and that had been a comfort for a while. She always knew when he was around.

That she thought she could now identify Spike in the same way warmed her more than it should.

Even with Willow's heads-up, Buffy couldn't help but be surprised to find Angel waiting for her, sitting halfway up the stairs with his elbows on his knees and his hands steepled. The second their eyes met, he sprang to his feet and hurried down the rest of the way, relief and anger playing in equal measure across his face.

"Where the hell have you been?" he demanded, reaching for her shoulders. He stopped himself, though, like he'd thought the better of it, and dropped his balled hands to his sides. "Do you have any idea how worried I've been? I come home and find my gun and... *Buffy*, what—"

"I know. I'm sorry."

"You're *sorry*? I've been looking for you all over town."

"You weren't home yesterday."

"What does that have to do with *my gun*?"

Nothing. But as long as they were making obvious observations, she was determined to keep up. "Just that you weren't here when I was. Where were you?"

"No, I think I'll be asking the questions here. Where the hell were *you*?"

"Out. Away. I couldn't be in this house anymore." She crossed her arms, knowing the gesture made her look defensive, but unable to stop herself. "It's been a really bad... You know, I've stopped counting how many days. Just really bad all around, okay? Being here, seeing what our life is like... I needed to get out. And when I came back, it all just kinda crashed on me."

"It's been like this for a while. So all of a sudden, it's too much for you?"

"No, not *all of a sudden*," Buffy said, this time with a good amount of bite in her voice. And that was it—she'd hit her quota for the day. No more dancing around things she shouldn't talk about, shouldn't feel, should leave to this world's Buffy. She was emotionally exhausted from all things Spike, and that was fine—all right, deserved—but Angel hadn't earned her patience or her tact, so he would get neither. "You said you've been pretending. So have I. I've been pretending that being back here isn't killing me. That finding out you could ever send my sister to live with my father when you know what kind of man he is, no matter how you feel about *me* anymore—"

"Buffy—"

"I've been pretending every *goddamn* second since I woke up in my coffin and I'm tired, Angel. I'm tired of pretending. I was supposed to be done. *Finished*. I am supposed to be in *fucking Heaven* and I'm not." That last bit came out a scream, torn from someplace deep inside her, her throat somewhat raw with the force of its escape. She blinked her surprise at herself, surprise at hearing the words aloud, at the look on Angel's face. His absolute shock charged her with a vindictive thrill. At last, she'd managed to come out ahead in one of their conversations. "I'm not," she said, calmer though on the edge, her voice hoarse. "I'm here. I'm here and getting through each day has been hell. Knowing what I know, feeling what I felt, going from a place where I

was safe and surrounded by light and love to...this. I can't keep pretending."

He didn't reply. Or maybe he couldn't. He stood there, open-mouthed, looking at her with that mix of horror that Buffy was already growing to hate.

"If there's something worse than awful, then that's what being back has been like." Buffy sniffed, shifted on her feet and wiped at her eyes. God, keep her from crying again. She didn't think she could take any more. "Every day just trying to find reasons to get up. To move. To be alive at all. I've done some things that make me feel like I'm not me. Like maybe I came back less Buffy than I was before. Yesterday was...a really bad day. I came home and I thought, maybe... But I didn't. Obviously. As screwed up as I am, as much as this world hurts, I can't just die. Not like that. So I left again."

"Buffy—"

"It's something I'm going through. I didn't mean to worry you. I just thought it was better to get away."

She released a breath to ground herself, hoping to whatever was out there that he wouldn't ask anything else. That he would just do his stoic Angel thing and accept what she was telling him. That this would be the end.

After a moment, he parted his lips, the sound wet and loud against the quiet. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"We don't talk anymore, remember?"

"This is different. This is..."

But he didn't say what this was. He didn't know any more than she did.

"I'm leaving," Buffy said a moment later. "Town," she clarified when he whipped his head up. "I'm leaving town for a few days. The paw wasn't at the shop. Turns out Giles... Before he left, he'd found who had it. The paw. I don't have all the details, except Giles wanted to buy it and the guy didn't want to sell. The story's changed and now he really wants rid of it, so I'm going to go get it. Not like I don't have the money."

Angel opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, but said nothing. It was all in his eyes, though. Questions and confusion that would

have, even a couple of days ago, made her swell with the hope that she might be able to find the man she'd once loved buried under all that human skin. Whatever else, their discussion the other night and her departure seemed to have changed something in him—or maybe woken something up.

Buffy swallowed, edged a step toward the door. "I'll let you know when I'm back in town," she muttered. It felt like the thing to say—at some point, there would have to be a reckoning between them. Either the them who stood here or the them that belonged here. No going back for this world's Buffy, and maybe that was what she needed. She hoped so. The life she'd built outside these walls was one she could envision herself being happy in, which made it all the more bittersweet, as happiness itself seemed like a fairytale. Something she'd believed in when she was a child the same way she'd believed in Santa Claus, only to have reality chip away at that belief with each passing second until there was nothing left but plain, ugly reality.

It wasn't until she was outside again, free of the oppressive air that seemed to live within the walls of Revello Drive, that she realized she hadn't pushed Angel to tell her where he'd been yesterday. For a moment, she hesitated, wondering if she ought to, but ultimately the thought of going back in was too exhausting to entertain. She'd been telling the truth—pretending was killing her, and she couldn't do any more today. Couldn't summon the indignation she'd need to pull off if it turned out Angel was having an affair of his own, or that he'd lost more money, or that he'd visited a divorce lawyer. All of those possibilities and the infinite more beyond them would require a longer conversation, a longer night of pretending, and she was done.

Buffy made it to the first turn off Revello Drive before she felt the telltale neck tingle again. Then he was there, falling into stride beside her like it was where he belonged. She tried to ignore the rush, the relief, how right it felt to have him with her, but ignoring all things Spike was becoming impossible. Especially when, for a moment, she thought he might have reached out as though to take her hand. A flash of palest skin, fingers straining toward hers, but then he pulled out his cigarettes and stuck one between his lips, leaving her with that rush of disappointment. Of want and need and missing something she'd never

had. Something she'd somehow grown to crave with soul-deep desperation that made the act of breathing itself painful.

She wondered if he suspected how she felt, half-hoped he didn't. While being alone with this feeling didn't hurt quite as much as had the hopelessness that had persuaded her to pick up the gun yesterday, in some ways, it was worse. The knowledge that thing she wanted could be hers, but for a series of wishes. Her own bad choices and wrong turns had caught up with her, and despite what he hoped—what they all hoped—she couldn't help but feel that it was too late to recover the distance she'd traveled. She'd gone too far off-road to ever find the path back.

But she'd search for it all the same. She owed Spike nothing less.

17

I SEE THAT THERE IS EVIL, AND I KNOW THAT THERE IS GOOD. NOW THE IN-BETWEENS, I NEVER UNDERSTOOD

There were things that had happened not all that long ago —in real-world time—that Buffy had completely forgotten. Spaces in her head where memories should be but weren't. Vague impressions or snippets of conversation, all set in a murky mind-fog with the black hole that was her mother's death in the middle. Someone had been good enough to tell her this was a normal reaction to grief, though she couldn't remember who or where or the context, or much else of note. Throw in the number of years—or what had felt like years—she had spent in Heaven, and Buffy guessed she was lucky to remember how to use cutlery on some days. After all, she had lived longer as a being apart from the world than she had in it.

It was reaching for the seatbelt that turned the vague inkling she'd had when Spike had mentioned his car into a full-blown memory. One simple stretch and suddenly her mind was awash in images and sensations she'd managed to leave on the other side of her grave. She had been in this car before, reached for the seatbelt before, discovered it didn't exist before. A whole evening of her life returned to her in vivid Technicolor.

Granted, she'd remembered the chaining-up part pretty damn well.

She'd just managed to forget that had been the second half of Spike's love declaration, not the whole.

"You tried to trick me into going on a date with you," Buffy said as Spike slipped behind the wheel.

He blinked his surprise—she hadn't said much of anything all morning—but didn't miss a beat. "I did what now?"

"You. The other you. I do remember this car." Though *car* was being somewhat generous. It was old, the kind of old that might be valuable if it had been taken care of. Spike, however, had apparently chosen the trashcan-on-wheels approach to automobile care, and that was before she got to the mixture of cardboard and spray paint he'd smeared across the windshield. "Only it was less with the road-hazardy."

He snorted. "Got a better solution for keepin' me from burstin' into flames, ducks, and I'm happy to hear it."

"I'm suddenly feeling like my inability to drive this thing was less a failure on my part."

Spike rolled his eyes, sticking his key in the ignition. Another moment of déjà vu hit her, and for a second, she was convinced the car wouldn't start. She remembered saying something to the same effect before—remembered the way Spike had bristled and stroked the steering wheel in a way that seemed overly suggestive. Or maybe she'd just been super sensitive to it that night, on the alert for anything that felt too much like a come-on. But he'd gotten the car to do more than make puttering noises, which had surprised her then. It surprised her now, too. Something this old and neglected was bound to have numerous issues even the best and brightest mechanic couldn't fix.

"No seat belts," Buffy observed, seizing the door on reflex when Spike peeled out of the lot. "Please refrain from driving like a maniac."

"Summers, I've seen *you* drive. Got no bloody room to talk." At last, he looked at her full-on, long enough to toss her a smirk, and her heart seized without her permission. She would have liked to have said it was due to the sharp left he took onto Maple Court toward the freeway, but she knew that would be a lie, so she didn't bother.

Last night had been another exercise in awkward—made more awkward, perhaps, because she'd been so damn aware of herself and

the new revelations she couldn't keep from reliving every few seconds. The evolution of her Spike-shaped thoughts was difficult to track, as it seemed to be happening so rapidly that she didn't have time to adjust to the new normal before it shifted again. Admitting she wanted him physically had been enough—a milestone, really, in their personal history. But revolutionary as it was, want was understandable, since it *was* physical, often brief, and easily satisfied. She could *want* a doughnut. That didn't mean she had strong feelings for it.

But Spike wasn't a doughnut, and she did. Have strong feelings. Feelings that had been there masked as something else for so long she might never have recognized them for what they were if he hadn't made it so damned obvious.

Needless to say, this made being with Spike—sharing his space and his bed and waking up with his erection pressed against her ass—something close to actual torture. Especially since she knew he knew, if not all of what she was feeling, then enough to be aware of it. To sense, understand, how everything between them now was charged.

He hadn't mentioned it once, though. Not once since she'd asked him to stop flirting with her. Since he'd proven that he could, in fact, take direction just fine when he wanted, because he'd followed that request to the letter. No more leers or winks or knowing smirks, no teasing glances or eyebrow waggles or anything that seemed like Spike. Of course, Buffy logic being what it was, the absence of these things made her feel more aware of herself than any amount of innuendo ever could.

"So tell me about this date, then," Spike said once they were on the freeway.

His voice broke over the hum of the engine and into her fog of thoughts, making her start.

"What?" she asked.

"Said somethin' about tricking you into a date. Try to wine and dine you? Brawl and a burger after?"

Buffy gave her head a shake, shoving back the haze. "Oh, right. Yes, a date. Actually, it was Dru."

"You went on a date with Dru?"

"Huh? No, you idiot. Dru was the reason." She scowled when he

snickered, hating the idea that he was enjoying himself when she was all flustered and thinking things she shouldn't. "She came to town and made a mess. You found some lackey vamps to pin it on and tricked me into going into a stakeout with you." Buffy eyed the glove compartment, more details flooding back. "And you offered me a flask of whatever gross thing you were drinking."

Spike chuckled, and she tried—she really tried—not to appreciate the sound. "Call that a date?"

"In the world of Spike, yes. Violence and romance seem to go hand-in-hand with you."

She didn't mean to look at him, but she did, and just in time to see him flex his eyebrows as though he were conceding the point. She wasn't sure he had any room to argue—he'd already been way with the forthright about how much he and this world's Buffy enjoyed getting each other hot by sparring.

"Sounds like I had a right nice night in store for you. How'd it go tits-up?"

"Aside from it being incredibly lame and obvious that you were just trying to get me alone?" Buffy sniffed. "Like I said, it was Dru. She'd killed a bunch of people coming into town—"

"Know that much. Happened on our side."

"Yeah. I read the letter—the one where you suggested letting her run into Angel so he'd go all fangy again."

At that, Spike grinned but kept his focus on the road. "Still say it was an elegant solution. Can't stand the wanker but can't stake him unless he doesn't have a pulse. Dru'd do anythin' to get Daddy Dearest back. Everyone wins."

"It's hard to believe I turned you down."

"There are times you don't appreciate what a right little problem-solver you have in me." Now he did look at her, his eyes bright and warm, full of more of the thing that wasn't hers. It didn't last, though. The second their gazes connected, he straightened as though he'd just remembered something and quickly turned away again. "So Dru bollixed up our dream date. Can't say I'm surprised."

"It wasn't that so much as...it was obvious the vampires you'd pinned the bus killing on had been in town for more than a day, so it

couldn't have been them," Buffy replied, hoping to whatever was out there that she sounded somewhat normal. It was beyond unfair how much Spike could convey with his eyes alone. "But it was the door that did it."

"The door?"

"You held it open for me."

"Right bastard that I am," Spike drawled.

"Well, it was weird! We weren't hold-the-door-open-for-each-other anything. And Dawn had me majorly wigged with the whole 'he's super in love with you' thing."

Once again, the dryness melted away without struggle, and he barked a laugh. "*Dawn* knew before you did? Actually, no, that makes sense. Nibblet's always seein' what she shouldn't. Hell, she had me givin' up the pretense before Hank pulled the disappearin' act. Didn't take much to suss it out, sure, but not how I would've had her find out."

"What pretense?"

"That I was there 'cause there was nothin' better to do than kidnap the Slayer's sister on sodding repeat."

Buffy pressed her lips together. "Dawn knows about...us?"

"Knows I'm in love with you, at least. Dunno if she's pieced the rest of it together, but I wouldn't put it past her." He hesitated before sliding another look her way—brief and without turning his head, but charged all the same. "So you were skittish 'cause of kid sis. Bloody figures. If it's not one Summers woman muckin' up my plans, it's another."

"Yeah," Buffy said, furrowing her brow and trying to shuck the panic she used to feel when Dawn knew something she shouldn't. Feeling it now made no sense—not her world, not her secret—but apparently some things couldn't be outrun. "I asked you point-blank if you meant for it to be a date, and then it was all out. You tried to tell me you loved me, and I made tracks. Like, cartoon tracks. I couldn't get out of there fast enough."

"Just what every gent who's ever poured his heart out wants to hear," Spike replied wryly. "How'd Dru figure into this?"

"Well, I went by your crypt later, I think to drive home that you

and I were never, ever happening." Memories were coming quicker the more she talked, foggy scenes becoming clearer. "You were gone, so I snooped and found a really gross Buffy shrine in your downstairs area, which really drove home just how gaga you were for me."

"Shrine? Someone thinks highly of herself."

She couldn't help but grin now. "Spike, it was a shrine. You had pictures of me, drawings Angel had done, stuff you'd stolen from my room—"

He was shaking his head like he couldn't believe it, and for the millionth time in the past however-many days, it hit Buffy just how weird all of this had to be for him, hearing about a world in which he'd been alone in this thing they shared, not a part of her inner circle. Not even a patrolling partner. In the life he'd lived, the fall had been mutual, or as mutual as Buffy could get. She had relied on him, confided in him, trusted him with parts of herself no one else got to see. That things between them could be so dramatically different elsewhere must seem ridiculous, even impossible. Spike knew what Buffy-in-love was like, after all. He'd experienced it firsthand. Even after she'd called things off, he'd known he still had her heart, and he'd been right. She'd come back.

Of course she had. Buffy had never been able to stay away from the man she loved, even when it was for her own good.

"Anyway," Buffy continued, forcing her voice around the sudden lump in her throat, "you ended up chaining me up downstairs. Me and Dru, actually."

At this, a wide smile stretched the seductive curve of his lips. "Yeah?" he asked. "That's more like it."

"You are so twisted."

"Vampire, love. Sounds like I got my stones back."

"You got something, all right. You were so determined to prove you loved me you offered to dust Dru."

Either they hit something, or he lost control of the car, as the DeSoto chose that moment to veer wildly toward the left, Spike cursing and seizing the wheel to direct them back on course. It lasted all of ten seconds but plastered Buffy to her seat with her hand slapped over her chest as she tried to calm her suddenly slamming heart. The

car gave a massive lurch that made the metal groan before it righted itself, and only then did she find her voice.

"The hell, Spike!"

"Sorry," he barked, shaking his head as though to clear it. "All right over there?"

"I might go into cardiac arrest, but yes."

"Just wasn't expectin'..." He blinked once, twice, then shot her a glare. A completely unwarranted glare, seeing as he was the one who had just nearly crashed against *nothing*. "I offered to kill Dru for you?" he demanded. "Bloody hell, woman, do you have the slightest idea what that means?"

"I know what you said then," Buffy shot back. His shock was no excuse for a near-death-experience-by-fireball. "Something about how much she meant to you, so I should see that—"

"Bloody right, you should see!"

"Spike, trying to convince a girl you love her by offering to kill the last girl you loved isn't exactly the romantic gesture you think it is."

"Maybe not, but it ought to have proved to you just how bloody serious I was." He pulled his gaze off the road long enough to throw her another glare. "Dru was everythin' to me. I worshipped her. I woulda done anythin' to keep her happy, make her smile—things I didn't even fancy doin' for myself. She made me who I am, saved me from rotting away, pathetic and forgotten. Even if she's not my whole sodding world anymore, that I would even *consider* killing her for anyone, for *you*, should clue you into just how much I meant it when I said I loved you."

"Maybe in some screwy vampire logic—"

"Only kinda logic I have, baby. Maybe you oughta respect that more."

Buffy's jaw went slack. "Respect? I need to respect vampires, now?"

"Why not? The best of us respect the hell outta you."

"Yeah, I'm sure those two slayers really felt your respect before you killed them."

He rolled his eyes again, tightening his grip on the steering wheel. "Clearly I never told you a thing about either one of those fights," he said through gritted teeth. "Only went after them *because* I respected

them. That's the entire reason I'm here to tell the tale and they're not. I respected how very dead they could make me. And you, too, you daft twit. Knew you'd be the bloody fight of a lifetime from the second I saw you. Fuck, I could *feel* your power and your strength, and I never took either for granted. That's why you never managed to do me in. Always knew you could, though, and I respected the hell out of it. Can you say the same?"

No, she couldn't say the same. She couldn't say much of anything, railroaded as she felt at the moment by everything he'd just unleashed. How vampires viewed the world had never been of interest to her—more than that, it had never been ambiguous. Eat. Kill. Destroy. Lather, rinse, repeat. What else was there to know, aside from how to make sure they bit the dust before they could do too much damage? The only exceptions to her rule had ever been Spike and Angel, and for very different reasons. As it was, Angel had never spoken at length about his soulless past, had always treated that subject like a live bomb. Something they needed to acknowledge in order to be together but never handle, lest it go off and take the whole town down with them.

But that was Angel, and after he'd walked out of her life, the thought of ever being involved with another vampire had been out of the question. Dreaming of normal, and all that. Except normal didn't work—not with Riley, not with Angel. The closest thing she'd gotten to normal was what she'd seen of what this world's Buffy had built with Spike.

Which, despite everything she'd come to accept over the past couple of days—everything she was *feeling* now, wanted or otherwise—still managed to surprise her.

And there was respect there. She'd felt it, burned with it, even in the brief period before Spike had known she wasn't his. That night at the Bronze—the one that seemed so long ago now—he'd touched and stroked and kissed her with more than just love and want. How he'd approached her afterward, worried and uncertain but desperate to be what she needed, and every second she'd spent with him since she'd come clean. Everything she'd learned about the life she lived here and shared, however she could, with him at her side.

"You're right," she said, her back hitting the seat hard enough to

startle the air out of her lungs. "I don't get it. The whole...threatening to kill Dru thing. Not the way you wanted me to."

Spike, who had been scowling at whatever he could see of the road these last couple of minutes, jerked his head in her direction, his eyes wide. It didn't last long—long enough for her to appreciate the surprise there—before he turned back, jaw still tense but not as tense as it had been a moment ago. "I'll have to mark the occasion," he muttered. "The Slayer admitted I was right."

"Is that something the other me doesn't do often?"

"Not often enough." But his mouth was twitching in that telling way of his, and some of the tension that had taken residence in his body eased away. "Thanks, pet."

"So...what would it have meant? Staking Dru?"

"Might be better to ask your Spike. Nice little way to start things up."

"You think I will."

"Sweetheart, we both know that's what you want."

"Wanting and doing are two different things."

Spike huffed, shaking his head. It was a look she knew well, one he whipped out often when he was exasperated with her. And like so many things as of late, the sight of it made her warm, even when it shouldn't. "Think you're only playin' coy 'cause it's bloody habit for you," he said. "I know you too well to think that whatever you're feeling will just go away. Like me in that. You feel with everything you are. Fuck, I'm pretty sure I told you as much when you were on about how I fell in love with you in the first place."

"But why do you care?" she asked—or rather, blurted before she could stop herself. "If everything goes right, you get your Buffy back and I go back to my world, what does it matter what happens between me and that Spike?"

He didn't reply for a long moment, verbally or nonverbally, just stared out the window, tapping his fingers along the steering wheel. The ensuing silence, save for the rumble of the car's engine and the wind against the windows, was almost absolute. Spike probably hadn't thought about their situation in those terms, as singularly focused as he'd been. He'd made mention a few times about what she might do

with her world's Spike if she got the chance, but never in a way to make her think he was all that invested.

"Want you to be happy," he said at last.

"What?"

"Don't sound so surprised. You know I love you."

"Right—you love *Buffy*. But—"

"Pretty damn sure you'll still be Buffy when you go back." He flicked his gaze to her just long enough to signal she shouldn't argue. "Could be foolin' myself somethin' spectacular, but I think I make you happy. *Her* happy. Much as I can, things bein' the way they are. Would do more—anythin' she asked—to be sure of it. And yeah, all right, I fancy the idea of me gettin' the girl in two different worlds. Fuck, all of them. However many there are, however it takes us. There's poetry in it, isn't there?"

The last bit he said in a rush, like he was embarrassed, which was something Buffy didn't see often. Spike tended to own and wear his failures, even those that were truly magnificent, pat himself down and move on to whatever was next. She wasn't sure what it meant, only that it meant something. Maybe everything.

"Though if you're really keen to know," he continued a moment later, "think the answer's simple."

"The answer?"

"Why I'd kill Dru for you." He shifted, still with an air of self-consciousness that struck her as odd yet almost perfectly *Spike* at the same time. "Can't say I know exactly what was goin' on in his head, but bein' that he's me, reckon my guess is as close to the truth as you'll get."

"What's your guess?"

"Dru made me what I was. Everything I was. Saved me from..." More shifting. "Well, ask him about it some time, yeah? Already told the story to my lady once, and that took a load of sauce and the promise of a brilliant suckjob."

"Spike!"

God, he was the strangest vampire in the world. She watched, bemused, as the tension that had been there since he'd mentioned

poetry rolled out of him. Like hearing her snap at him had set things right again.

"Dru made me what I was," he said, his voice still low, but firm now. Certain. "But I'm not that anymore, and I don't want to be. Now I'm yours. There's no goin' back. There's just you."

It was so simple yet, as he said it, so obvious. And all the more terrifying because of it.

"Shouldn't you be yours before you're mine, though?"

He snickered. "Never been a big fan of *should*."

"It's still... It's a lot, Spike. To put on someone."

"Not puttin' anything on you. You don't need to do anythin' for it to stay the truth. Think he proved that, didn't he? Stickin' around after you kicked it, watchin' over the Nibblet, doin' what he thought you'd want if you were there." He waited for a reaction, then rolled right on when he didn't get one. "I don't lose a sodding thing worth keepin' in being yours, Buffy. All I *should* be is what I want to be. You know what that is. Whether you love me or not, answer's never gonna change."

Buffy had nothing to say to that. She was afraid to try. But broken down and taken at face value, all Spike had given her were the words that described things she already knew, things she'd seen with her own eyes. She'd had it going into the fight with Glory and she'd been clinging to it ever since she'd come back from the dead. Spike would be what she needed, whatever she needed, and that would remain separate from the way he wanted her. He was hers to use and abuse or do whatever she pleased.

But god, Buffy didn't want to use him. If she ever got back to her world, she wanted something like this. Not easy but theirs. Where he gave and she gave back and neither owned the other but still somehow did, in whatever way that made sense.

He would give that to her happily. And he'd be happy, too. Perhaps, if she did it right, she could be as well.

Right now, she would settle for *all right*, and *all right* was a long way off.

"Okay," she said at last.

Spike shifted his gaze to her. "Okay?"

"Yeah. Okay."

He looked at her a second longer before returning his attention to the road. And while he didn't reply or ask what she meant, his lips twitched like he was fighting off a grin, and she knew he knew.

BUFFY WASN'T sure she'd ever stop shaking. She hadn't fully let herself believe that the trip to meet this guy would yield anything other than disappointment, and even though it was still an uphill climb—even though finding the damn thing only solved one of their problems—the fact that she had the case she had first seen in the Magic Box basement in her lap felt momentous. A hurdle crossed. No more searching through the inventory avalanche. No more retracing her steps, wondering what might have happened between the second it had taken to get from her world to this one.

They had the monkey's paw.

The meeting had taken place at a diner on the outskirts of Las Vegas—a small, nondescript joint that looked like it had never met a health inspection it couldn't fail. They had arrived just before sunset and managed to park in a place near enough the door that Spike hadn't had to rush in like all of hell was chasing him. Singer had already been there, tucked into a corner booth, scowling at the door as though it had insulted him, being no more cordial in person than he had been over the phone. He'd growled a greeting but made it clear he wasn't interested in small talk, which had suited Buffy just fine. She hadn't wanted to stay any longer than necessary.

She'd also had a few questions she'd been sitting on since the previous night.

"Why Giles?"

Singer was the sort of man Buffy might have found intimidating once, but that time had long since passed. He was older, late forties or early fifties, slightly paunchy and with an apparent affinity for flannel. A ballcap had been pulled low over his head, covering hair that—if his beard were any indication, was reddish-brown—and shadowing the sort of face that clearly communicated he had *seen things*. Or that he'd toured the world and found the world lacking. Also, he'd seemed to

have little patience for her, or much of anything for that matter. "The hell you mean, why Giles?" he'd shot back. "He's the one who called me, ain't he?"

Oddly enough, this was one area where Buffy felt fully equipped to toss around her weight. The burden of the last few days had suddenly become lighter, and she'd dug out her best glare to throw right back at him. "You want rid of the monkey's paw, right?"

He'd nodded, narrowing his eyes.

"Just asking why you held out for Giles."

"He had the best offer."

"Which we already told you we weren't going to meet, yet you showed up anyway." She'd grinned, crossing her arms, feeling something like herself for the first time in ages. "Are you telling me you couldn't find another buyer?"

Singer had glared at her for a long beat, the skin visible beneath his cap and beard tingeing red. In hindsight, she supposed she'd gambled with that strategy—some men couldn't stand to have their pride poked, particularly by young blondes less than half their age. But still, he *had* shown up, even after Spike had made it clear whatever Giles had offered was no longer on the table. That had to mean something.

It had. Slowly, with his glare in place and lips barely moving, Singer had coughed up the story. One involving his wife, whom he'd lost to cancer the previous year. The reason he'd sought out the monkey's paw in the first place. He'd heard what it could do and seen just enough to believe it. After taking another mortgage out on the house and cashing in his retirement, he'd managed to top the best offer at a private black arts auction right out from under Giles's nose. Giles had immediately implored him to not use the paw, to let him destroy it, warning about the dire consequences of resorting to dark magic. Singer had told him where to shove it. The worst, after all, had already happened. Nothing the paw threw at him could make a damn dent.

"Yeah," he'd said, choking on his own bitterness. "Say it. I was a dumbass."

Buffy would have been glad to agree under normal circumstances, pleasant as he hadn't been, but found her irritation with the man had died when he'd mentioned his wife's cancer. As it was, Singer hadn't

stopped long enough to allow for commentary, rather forged ahead with perhaps the most horrible story she'd ever heard.

It had taken time, he'd explained, to get things the way he wanted them. The way *she* would have wanted them. After losing his wife, things like taking care of the house hadn't mattered much, and Singer had let the place go. Once he had the paw, he couldn't bear the thought of welcoming her to a home that was less than what she remembered, and he hadn't wanted to waste a wish on something he could do with his own two hands. So he had devoted himself to fixing up his property, getting it ready for the best homecoming a woman could have. It had taken a while, maybe a month, to get everything perfect. All the while that old crackpot Giles kept calling, offering him more money, telling him it wasn't too late, begging him to not use the damn paw.

One day, the calls had stopped, and that had been just fine with Singer. Finally, the damn Brit had gotten the message. Not for sale. And not too long after that, after the flowers had been replanted and the junk carted off to the scrap heap, it had been time to see his wife.

Unlike with Buffy, the paw hadn't created a new universe. She supposed there hadn't been as much to change, and nothing to rewrite. Singer's request had been simple—he'd asked for his wife to come home. And so she had, a walking corpse dressed in Mrs. Singer's Sunday best, looking at him through milky, unseeing eyes as worms and maggots dug new holes into what little gray, wispy skin still covered her cheeks. Arms outstretched, a rattling sort of cry tumbling through a lipless mouth, not forming words and not screaming either, but damning all the same.

By his account, Singer had locked his wife in the cellar without a word, then stomped over to the phone and dug out Giles's phone number. But it had been too late, of course. Too much time had passed. The calls went unanswered. He'd tried burning the monkey's paw, listening as his dead wife raked her brittle fingers against a door he refused to open, but the paw hadn't burned. He'd tried sawing it in two, but that hadn't worked, either. He'd even pressed the nozzle of his 12-gauge against the palm and pulled the trigger, but for all the good it had done, he might as well have asked it to a dance. When he'd

exhausted his attempts to destroy the thing, he'd known this was his punishment.

He'd have to kill the wife he'd already buried once.

Except she was already dead, wasn't she? A corpse in motion, one he'd asked to come home. He'd put a round in her skull, and she'd kept moving, kept making that awful noise. He'd taken her head clean off but those low, not-cries, not-screams, hadn't slowed. He'd tried leaving her in pieces and the pieces had found their way back to him, always wiggling, reaching, grasping for the husband that had pulled them from the grave.

It had finally ended in the desert, thanks to a five-gallon gas can and a match. Singer had watched and fanned the flames until there was nothing of his wife but ash. And even that ash, he'd said, had followed him home. But that was all right. Ash, at least, couldn't scream.

Buffy had sneaked a glance at Spike, who, while not horrified, had looked a little uncomfortable. But he hadn't said anything, just waited along with her as Singer explained, in a voice that hadn't wavered once, *that* was the reason it had to be Giles. Giles wanted the thing destroyed. Maybe he knew how, seeing as Singer had exhausted all the obvious methods. And even if he didn't know how, at least he was certain Giles wouldn't be fool enough to use the damn thing. He'd keep others from repeating his mistake.

It hadn't been until Buffy had disclosed that she, too, had used the paw, that Singer's skepticism of their intent had faded for good. He hadn't asked the wishes or the consequences, just given a gruff nod, reached under the booth, and shoved the case across the table, muttering something that sounded like, "Good riddance."

And now it was here. In her lap. And she would never get the images of what that man had described out of her head.

"Buck up, Slayer. We got what we came for," Spike said as he settled in the seat beside her. "Woulda bloody given the thing away if you hadn't insisted."

But Buffy had—insisted, that was. She'd ended up matching Giles's best offer, feeling that was the least she could do for a man who had cashed everything in just to have the world ripped away like that. If

she'd been through anything similar, she doubted she would have been half as personable.

"It wasn't like that for me," she muttered, absently running a hand over the case.

"What wasn't?"

"Doesn't...doesn't what he went through make the consequences to my wishes seem tame?" She swallowed, an unidentifiable *something* rising in her chest. Her mind was awake with visions of Singer's wife, a moving corpse, chipping away at the bones in her fingers. Of having to do what he'd done to her over and over again with no reprieve.

"They seem tame to you?" Spike asked, his voice low. "What's happened since you've been here?"

"Compared to that?"

"Reckon it's all a matter of perspective, yeah? That's the way dark mojo works." He was quiet for a moment, his arm stretched across the back of the seat so that his fingers were nearly brushing her shoulder. "Why I hate the stuff, myself. Somethin' this old and powerful has a taste for what it takes to break a person. Knew where to hit you, didn't it? How to make it hurt? Make you feel helpless, alone, responsible. What's that to killin' a monster when you're the Slayer?"

What he said made sense but also didn't. "There's a difference between killing monsters and killing someone I love. The time I killed Angel *did* nearly break me, though. I don't think—"

"Seems I recall the thing you were killin' then *was* the big oaf, not somethin' using him like a puppet," Spike continued, now with an edge that hadn't been there before. Like saying as much bothered him. It had been so long since she'd heard anything remotely like that in Spike's voice that it startled her into listening. "If somethin' like what that old cod described came knocking, you'd know better. Not sayin' it wouldn't hurt, but it wouldn't break you. You'd be the hero."

Buffy inhaled shakily and lifted her gaze to his. Night hadn't quite fallen, and she could make out the blue there. Steady and confident, and something else. Something that had her chest tightening and her eyes stinging all over again.

"How do you know?" she asked hoarsely.

He shrugged, grinning a little. "'Cause it's you." A beat. "'Cause you're stronger than I am."

"Huh?"

Another pause, this one longer and heavier, like he was weighing what to say. Ultimately, though, he said nothing at all, just jammed his key in the ignition and brought DeSoto to life.

And she wondered if he was thinking about her resurrection, the many ways it could have gone wrong—she'd been right outside the door when Giles and Willow had had that argument so she knew she'd gotten off easy—and what he would have had to do if she hadn't been Buffy when she'd punched herself out of the grave. Or what he thought he wouldn't have been able to do.

She decided it was better not to explore that particular what-if, unnerved by where it might lead her. Not knowing if she could say with confidence that she would make the right decision, herself.

But she loved that, for Spike, it wasn't a question at all. That he had that much confidence in her, especially after seeing what he'd seen. Especially after that awful thing she'd done to him and what she'd nearly done to herself. Somehow, his belief in her remained unwavering, even if her own was fractured. Even if coming out of it, as deep as she was inside, seemed impossible.

Hell, maybe it was. Maybe she would never make it out of the hole she'd landed in, shaken as she was by the action she'd nearly taken two days ago, avoiding the magnetic pull of those same thoughts that had dragged her into a spiraling abyss of desperation and solitude. But then again, Buffy knew Spike knew that—she knew that was why he kept her moving, kept focused on the next stop, the next task, the next way to surmount the insurmountable. It was enough that the thoughts she'd had, sitting alone in the room this world's Buffy shared with her husband, weren't seductive anymore. Present, yes, but rather like a wound that had begun to heal. Prick it just right and it'd start bleeding again, but keep taking care of it and it would become nothing but another scar on a body covered with them.

Spike didn't view her as broken, and more than anyone, he would know.

18

SHE SAW THE LIGHTS, SHE SAW THE PALE ENGLISH FACE

THOUGH SHE'D PACKED A CHANGE OF CLOTHES AT SPIKE'S insistence, Buffy was surprised when he pointed the car toward the city rather than the stretch of highway that would lead them back to Sunnydale.

"Uhh, now seems like it might not be the best time to go gambling," she said, still clutching the box that held the paw. As though it might vanish on her if given the chance. "Thought we had a monkey's paw to try and destroy."

Spike huffed and made some adjustment to the gears, or something. She didn't know. Not the person to ask about cars. "Yeah, well, assumin' that old sod wasn't blowin' smoke, normal ways aren't gonna be enough to do the job."

"So the answer is Caesar's Palace?"

He rolled his eyes. "Have any kind of idea the sorta creatures that call Vegas *home*, pet?"

"Having been to Vegas all of once when I was eleven and my dad was on a business trip? No."

"Worth askin' around to see if the sorta firepower we need is here before we head back." He threw her a look, grinning slightly. "Don't

worry your pretty little head. I know where to go to get in with the high rollers."

"You know I wasn't worried until you said that."

"I aim to please."

"Just tell me we're not going to stay somewhere gross."

Spike had the audacity to pout. "What kinda date do you take me for?"

That remark dangerously encroached upon the forbidden flirting territory, but she decided not to call him out on it. Truth was, the longer she thought, the more relieved she was that they weren't heading back to the Hellmouth just yet. One way or another, her fate would be spelled out when they returned—either destroy the thing and go back to a world where she might not be as welcome as the girl whose place she'd taken or learn there truly was no road home. That she was stuck in this universe her foolishness had created.

The last time she'd been to Vegas, her dad had booked a suite at one of the more impressive landmarks along the famous Strip. She'd been small—and there only by virtue of the fact that her mother had won the "who gets stuck with the kids" coin toss on a weekend when they'd both had business trips and every possible sitter had been snatched up. There hadn't been much for her to do, though she had been given license to walk to the wax museum, which Dawn had found endlessly more fascinating than she had. What Vegas lacked in kid-appropriate activities, it made up for in glam—things that Buffy had seen and wanted to explore when she was old enough. Never would she have thought her first return trip would be anything other than a tour of those attractions, but here she was.

The hotel Spike booked wasn't nearly as glamorous as the one her father had chosen that one time, nor was it near the Strip. It wasn't a total dive, though, and that was more than she'd expected. Actually, all things being equal, the place was pretty respectable. The rooms weren't even outward-facing—had to be accessed by going through the slot-machine laden lobby, which surprised her. Not that she had given Spike's lodging habits too much consideration before now, but if asked, she would have easily seen him fitting more comfortably at a seedy motel, the sort that rented rooms by the hour.

She didn't know what to make of the sinking sensation she experienced when he pushed the door open and she saw there were two beds, except that it was there. Even still, she plastered on a smile to meet his when he threw a grin over his shoulder.

"Well, won't have to worry about me invadin' your space tonight, at least," he said.

"That's good," she replied, hoping she sounded more convincing aloud than she did in her head. Thinking that maybe she didn't, from the way he looked at her. She sighed and shifted her overnight bag to the floor so she could hold the monkey's paw case with both hands. "So, what's the plan? We hit some demon bars? Beat up someone for information? Just tell me where to go."

"You, ducks, are gonna camp it right here. Find somethin' on the telly, order up some nosh." At that, Spike turned and tugged her deeper into the room, toward the bed farthest from the door. "I'll be back before sunrise."

"What? No, I am not just waiting around here." This would be even more boring than her last trip to Vegas. "I'm the Slayer. This is my job."

"To pal around with demons? Turn your head and keep a low profile when they start bragging on who has the biggest uglies?"

"Considering I'm in a relationship with *you*, of all people—"

"You're not," Spike snapped with more fire than the remark warranted.

Buffy blinked, stepped back, unsure whether she should be hurt or offended or ashamed or a combination thereof. That hadn't been what she'd meant—or had it? No, she knew where she stood with Spike. Had accepted it the instant he'd ushered her back to his crypt even after what she'd done to him.

He seemed to realize he'd overreacted the next second, for he lowered his voice and edged closer. "This isn't somethin' I'd let you tag along for even if you were...well, the Buffy who's mine."

She was still confused over the unexpected enmity but decided not to pursue it. If anything, Spike had more than earned the right to be hostile with her. Even if he was talking out of his ass. "I'm sorry, *let* me? Who's the Slayer here?"

"That's the point. You're the Slayer. These gits aren't gonna flap their traps if they know they're seconds away from gettin' slain if they say somethin' you don't like."

"So I won't slay. Problem solved."

At this, he narrowed his eyes. "Gonna hear some mighty nasty things tonight. Could be the sort of demon there who eats baby marrow. That gonna be the sorta thing you can just let slide, *Slayer*?"

Buffy knew she'd lost the fight before she opened her mouth—knew it for the way her face contorted, and the way Spike responded in kind, all smug victory that made her want to punch off his smirk.

"And I'm supposed to just be okay with letting demons like that exist, anyway?"

"Look, pet, you wanna get home or not?"

That certainly was the question, wasn't it? Though not much of one, given all the ways Spike kept reminding her how badly he wanted her gone. Perhaps not as overtly as he had a couple of days ago—he'd become softer since the incident—but never so soft that she forgot that she was not *his* Buffy, or that everything he said or did was informed by the fact that he couldn't get her back to her own world quick enough.

These thoughts were as unhelpful as they were cyclical. Still, Spike's assurances to the contrary, she couldn't help the worry that persisted—the one that even if she managed to get back to her world, the *something* she was feeling for Spike would be something less than what he'd experienced with this world's Buffy. They were the same people, yes, but they also weren't. This world's Buffy was, while not unscathed from her experiences, not nearly as broken.

When she didn't respond, Spike's hard stare gentled in that way that made it perfectly clear he knew what she was thinking. He didn't call her on it, though, just sighed and took a step toward the door. "Be back before sunup," he told her again. "Will need to catch some kip before we head out. Might ring Willow and let her know we have the paw, yeah? See if she's sussed out whether or not that'll help in findin' which world's yours."

Buffy pressed her lips together and nodded. "I will."

"Right." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Have yourself a nice night, pet."

Before this entire experience, she would have believed wholeheartedly that it was impossible to make Spike feel *that* self-conscious.

Except that wasn't what it was. It was pity.

"Yay me," she said to the room once he was on the other side of the door, plonking her butt rather haphazardly on the bed he'd steered her toward. "Still got it."

For a few minutes, Buffy just sat, staring at the case in her lap, contemplating the item inside. That small, unassuming thing that somehow had the ability to build and destroy worlds. The thing she had been trying to find almost from the moment she'd arrived in this place and now *had*, despite all odds. The thing that would decide her fate in the next couple of days. She debated undoing the case's latches, lifting up the lid to look at the paw properly, triple-checking what she and Spike had already verified. That it was indeed in there and the trip hadn't been for nothing.

But that wasn't all—there was an itch at the back of her mind, an itch that wasn't temptation, rather the fear of temptation. Stupid as it was, *insane* as it was, especially with everything she knew and had experienced, a very real part of her didn't trust herself with the paw unsupervised. Not that she hadn't learned her lesson or was all that eager to jump into a different world and create a new mess for a new version of the people she loved, but she'd known it was a bad idea the first time, too, and her brain had somehow managed to talk her into it. These days, she felt she was one persuasive argument away from complete self-destruction. Case in point—she'd tried to kill herself a couple of days ago.

The paw wasn't safe with her. It wasn't safe with Spike, either, given the company he planned to keep tonight. Definitely wasn't safe in the car. But there had to be an option—somewhere she could tuck it until morning, away from her and protected from hotel staff. Somewhere truly safe.

Safe...

Maybe like an actual safe. Hotels had those, didn't they? Some did. Did this one?

Buffy held her breath and glanced around the room, first carelessly then with some consideration. And there it was—situated in a closet nook alongside a row of theft-proof hangers. The perfect place to hide this thing before her stupid-prone brain managed to do something stupid.

As though the thought were a warning, Buffy launched to her feet, at once desperate to get the case out of sight. She'd never worked a hotel room safe before, but the instructions were provided and easy enough to follow. Hit a key. Choose a combination. For that, she went with the first slew of numbers that hit her—those she had to walk by every night on patrol, see on the headstone bearing her name. Presto, done. And just like that, the case was behind a door, closed, locked away and out of sight. At least now if she got a really bad idea, there was a barrier between her and putting it into action.

Small comfort that it was.

Granted, with that taken care of, Buffy had little left to do aside from the tasks Spike had left her—order room service and call Willow. Her stomach had been growly since the diner—the same diner where she'd patently refused to order food after spotting a fry cook picking his nose with one hand and poking whatever he was frying up with the other. The food had smelled good in a greasy, guilty-pleasure kind of way, which made selecting dinner easy enough. Hopefully, the bacon cheeseburger she ordered would look at least halfway as appetizing as did the picture on the provided menu. She could use some comfort calories.

The phone call to Willow yielded no new information. Yes, they were still looking. No, they hadn't had any big breaks. Excellent news about the paw, though. Not sure if it would help but it certainly couldn't hurt, and how did the talk with Angel go? Well, it could have been worse. And hey, great idea on Spike's part, sniffing around for alternative power sources to destroy the thing. They were doing the same on their end, in between world-searching, trying to see if there was a way to relight or replicate the Promethean Flame. There had to be, no matter what Anya said. And even if that were a bust, they would find another way. They always did. Take care and sleep tight.

That *other* note had been present in Willow's tone the entire time.

It was subtle—so subtle Buffy might have been able to convince herself it was in her imagination if she didn't know her friend as well as she did. But she *did* know her friend, and she specifically knew how Willow acted when she was trying to make like everything was hunky-dory. She'd done the same thing a few years ago when Buffy had returned from Los Angeles following her summer sojourn, become a distant version of herself. And Buffy supposed, in this case, it was a fair response. *She* was the one who had made the mistake and was now asking others to help her clean up her mess. She was the one who had taken the rightful Buffy's place, thieving interloper that she was.

Yet even knowing all that couldn't ease the gut feeling that rose anytime she thought of this world's version of her friends. She'd felt distant from the gang before—like they were standing on opposite sides a mirror or something, their perspectives perpetually at odds. In her world, it had been a balancing act of pretending to be okay, grateful, happy to be alive while knowing she was doing a poor job of it. Trying to fit in and smile when Xander said something funny, or exchange a smirk with Willow anytime Anya went on a pro-capitalism rant. Trying to be Buffy. And yeah, there had been a number of concerned looks and more than one frown, but the drive had been present on their end. Reconnecting and reestablishing their dynamic as a group of friends-turned-family who would do anything for each other, now on the other side of the most difficult fight they had ever waged.

Here was different. Truthfully, Buffy hadn't thought much of her friends since she'd left Xander's house a couple of nights ago. Maybe because it wasn't actually them to her—not the way Spike had, more or less, become Spike. He didn't mince words or put on a show for her benefit, but he didn't shut her out, either.

Except tonight, which annoyed her a little, even though his reasons were sound.

Even so, she couldn't help but reflect on that—that she was here with Spike and not back in Sunnydale in research mode. That even with the things she'd done, Spike felt it natural for her to accompany him. It wasn't a question, she realized, and he hadn't asked. Just made

plans, full steam ahead, and of course Buffy would be with him because where else would she be?

Her meal arrived, shaking her out of her head, which was likely a good thing, and giving her something else to focus on. She flicked on the television while she wolfed down her thoroughly mediocre burger and as many lukewarm fries as she could tolerate, but determined rather quickly that there was nothing on that would keep her mind off where Spike might be now, who he might be talking to, if he'd found any promising leads.

If she had to wait around in this room for him to return, she would go nuts.

The thought barely had time to bloom before Buffy was her feet, the tray containing her dinner tipping over on the bedspread, but she didn't care. She couldn't stay here, needed to get out. Away from her destructive thoughts, away from the paw, away from the clock which seemed stopped for as slow as it was going. Spike didn't want her potentially blowing a lead—fine. That didn't mean she had to sit here like a child in timeout.

After stuffing the room key into her pocket, she gave the room a quick once-over, then headed out the door. Down the hall and through the maze that led to the shockingly loud lobby, which was alight with slot machines so bright and flashy they were an assault to the senses.

The thing about Vegas casino hotels—and she'd forgotten this from when she'd visited as a child—was they were almost impossible to navigate. Since it was in the casino's best interest to keep butts on stools, feeding bills to hungry machines, they'd structured the place sans windows, so the poor sops gambling away their children's college fund wouldn't realize how much time had passed or, by the same token, how much money they'd lost. No windows also meant no clear-cut visual landmarks, which spelled trouble for a certain slayer, as she was a visual landmark kind of girl. But Buffy had followed Spike inside, as he'd seemed to know where to go, and had assumed that they would stick together for the duration of their stay, so she hadn't paid much attention to the passing scenery. There had been at least one turn that she remembered, maybe two, but hell if she knew where they were to take them now. All the machines looked alike.

It took a combination of dodging the tourists and servers and weaving her way through the windowless interior for Buffy to catch a break, and that break came in the form of a breath that smelled vaguely of car exhaust. She followed the scent and, through a haze of cigarette smoke, finally saw a sign pointing toward the exit.

It wasn't until she was outside with the cool Vegas air caressing her skin that Buffy realized she had no idea where to go. Wasn't like anyone came to Sin City with an eye to tour the local graveyards—at least not normal people. And unlike Sunnydale, the night sky was positively ablaze with flashing lights and the occasional explosion of fireworks. People were out on the town, and the last thing she wanted to do was attract attention by getting into a scuffle.

Leaving the hotel didn't necessarily mean patrol, though. In fact, it was probably a good idea to keep close to home base, being that she was a tourist and could be directionally challenged at times. Just look at how long it had taken her to get freaking outside. If she was lucky, she might stumble across some demonic activity within, say, a five-block radius. Or something that would enable her to flex her slayer muscles and jettison some of the tension that had been building since she and Spike had peeled out of Sunnydale that afternoon.

All the things her mind was busy thinking—or busy trying not to think—seemed easier to handle if she kept moving. Even if she didn't do anything but walk, the art of motion itself might be enough to trick her brain into thinking something was under her control.

Nothing was, though. Sooner or later that thing that she already knew was fact would cement for her—for Spike, too, wherever he'd ended up tonight. What he was doing tonight was no different—hoping to seize hold of something that would make him feel in charge when he was anything but. Perhaps that was the other half of why they'd gone into the city rather than turned around and headed for home. The sooner they arrived, the sooner he would have to reckon with the truth of what Anya had told them.

The closer he came to the possibility that there would be no great plan that turned generations of conventional wisdom on its head. That the heartbreak he'd experienced the other night was the first honest moment he'd had since Buffy had broken into his world.

This was something Buffy hadn't let herself consider too much since Spike had tackled her to the bed and wrestled Angel's gun from her grip. He had remained certain, dedicated to the idea that the paw could be found and destroyed. And he'd been at least partially right—it had been found. She'd thought that impossible and he hadn't lost faith. Just like he wasn't losing it now. Not once during Singer's story had Spike so much as flinched. Singer, in the world according to Spike, simply hadn't gotten the method right. Hadn't tried hard enough to do what needed to be done. Spike would not make the same mistake. He'd start looking in the right places, perhaps find a Vegas demon to do the dirty work for them. Buy Willow and the others more time to dig up alternatives. Stay here where he still had the possibility of seeing his Buffy again before going back to get the answer he dreaded.

Buffy shivered, turned a corner off their hotel's street, moving farther away from the Strip with every step. One thing being a vampire slayer in Los Angeles had taught her was the touristy areas, contrary to popular belief, were typically not the best hunting grounds. Too many people, which worked well for blending but also lent itself more readily to the chance of being caught. Really lazy bloodsuckers might haunt Rodeo Drive for easy targets, but most knew better.

Others stuck to the shadows, the places where adventurous tourists might wander, people who were brave or reckless if not plain lost. And in any big city, there were plenty of those who fit the bill. In fact, she wasn't far from the hotel when the unmistakable sound of a struggle-in-progress reached her ears. Telltale gasps and grunts and whispered commands to *be quiet or else*.

Sounded like a party just begging to be broken up.

Or like the distraction she needed.

Buffy broke into a jog, her heart hammering in her ears, and let her senses guide her the rest of the way. It wasn't far, though a bit farther than she'd first thought—her hearing perhaps not superior to humans' but better in-tune—and she found herself in a ripe-for-crime corner of the city in a span of seconds. Near a liquor store that looked shady enough to have regular robbers rather than customers, and custodian of one dark alleyway that, like all dark alleyways, just begged to be the stage for felonies-in-progress.

And sure enough, a felony was happening. She hit the mouth of the alley just in time to see some asshole disappear behind a dumpster, dragging a struggling woman in tow. The woman let out a series of yelps, her cries shrill but staccato, like she was trying to keep quiet but couldn't. It was a scene torn from the reels of every bad guy movie Buffy had ever watched, which in a twisted way provided a sense of familiarity that she appreciated.

This, at least, was cut and dried. Some guy in a ski mask attacking a woman. Nothing new under the sun.

"Hey!" Buffy shouted, resting her hands on her hips. She realized, belatedly, that she didn't have a weapon on her, but that was likely a good thing. Would keep whatever was about to unfold more or less even. "How about you pick on someone my own size?"

The asshole mugger—or rapist, or both—whipped his head toward her, what she could see of his eyes through the slits in his mask somewhat wild, like he thought he might be in actual trouble. That was until he saw she was quite alone. Then he relaxed. "Tell you what," he drawled. "You wait your turn like a good little girl, and I'll get right on that."

Buffy rolled her eyes and strolled forward. "I'll tell *you* what's going to happen," she said. "You're going to let her go. Then you're going to run. Yeah, I'm going to catch you, but you'll try to run. And then—and here's my favorite part—you'll learn exactly what it's like to be the one screaming *stop* when—"

Something hard slammed on the back of her head and stars exploded behind her eyes, and Buffy went down. She went down so fast her knees snapped when they hit the pavement; her surroundings went fuzzy and distant, her vision narrowing, black at the edges, nausea contorting her stomach and threatening to send her disappointing cheeseburger back up her throat. The black intensified at an alarming rate, her ears suddenly filled with a high-pitched ring, and for a second—a long, terrifying second—she thought her body might just crap out on her. That's all, night-night, and what a pathetic way to go. A dirty alley in a city she'd only visited once—she who had defeated immortal mayors and deranged hellgods and her own goddamn boyfriend, done in by a pair of common criminals.

The ring began to fade after a few seconds, or at least separate enough that she could pry apart the odd marriage of sounds. Sound one—a scream, the sort that pierced her temples and made the spreading dark consume even more real estate. Sound two—a laugh. Not a nice laugh, a bad guy laugh. And not even a good bad guy laugh, because these two clowns weren't good bad guys. There were guys who had gotten luckier than they could have ever known, and god, did that ever piss her off.

Sound three—a voice. A deep, gravelly voice, saying words she didn't understand, though it was close enough that her nostrils flooded with the sour scent of beer and body odor. Her stomach churned again, and this time she was certain she *would* get sick. The need rushed up her throat along with a wave of dizziness that joined forces with the expanding black. It would come, she would go, and that would be it.

But she couldn't pass out. If she passed out, it was over.

Buffy latched onto the thought like the life preserver it was, shoving through the fog and enticing promise of sleep. Slowly, the hazy shapes around her solidified, colors unmerging, voices untangling, words given meaning once more. She blinked slowly, so slowly she wondered if her eyelids were glitchy, and managed to turn her head even though doing so made everything swim. The person screaming was the woman she'd seen earlier. Not a woman, a girl. Someone who looked barely older than Dawn, clutching still the bottle she'd illegally purchased from the neighboring liquor store. And when their eyes met, Buffy knew her story.

Sent here by her friends to get some booze. Maybe not friends. Maybe people she thought were friends—people she wanted to impress by putting her fake ID to the test. These two assholes had watched from a neighboring lot, or perhaps across the street, as this young thing barely old enough to drive had helped herself into the liquor store. How had she gotten here? It didn't matter. All that mattered was she *had* gotten here and now she would be sorry. God yes, she would be very sorry. They'd steal whatever she bought and whatever cash she had on her, and she'd be lucky if that was all they took.

"She's cute," one of the voices was saying when she clued back into their conversation. "Dumb little thing though."

"I've seen cuter," said the gravelly voice from before. Then she felt him over her, right behind her, his big feet bracing her hips. He leaned forward, his movements slow enough that she might have—had her head not been spinning—surprised him with a head-butt, but making things spin even more than they already were seemed like a bad idea. Instead, she waited, waited, then he had her hair wrapped around his hand so he could pull her head back and press something cool and metallic into her temple.

"Jesus, Frank!" the other asshole shouted—the one who thought she was dumb but cute. "The fuck you thinkin'?"

Frank didn't respond, just pressed the barrel harder against her skull, and Buffy had an awful but very real urge to laugh. Hell, it *was* funny. Second time in two days she'd had a gun pointed at her head. She and Frank had the same idea, it seemed. Great minds.

Great fucking minds.

But Spike had stopped her. He'd charged into the room, knowing something was wrong even if he didn't know what. She'd done something terrible to him, and he'd come after her anyway, cared enough *anyway*, thrown himself on top of her and wrestled away the gun. And when she'd dissolved, he'd been there, too. Pulled her to him, kissed her forehead and told her that he knew, he understood, that it was all right. He'd taken her home, ushered her back into the bed where she'd done that terrible thing, and told her he loved her. Two days had passed but so much more had happened. The future was no less uncertain, and her present was rocky as hell and she could be dead. She *could* be. She could let it happen here just as easily as she'd almost made it happen there. She could close her eyes and it would almost be like it wasn't her fault. Wrong place, wrong time. Another cautionary tale for tourists.

Just a handful of hours between that moment in Angel's room and this one on the pavement, and she arrived—rather crash-landed—into a realization so hard she nearly burst into tears.

She *could* let it happen just like that, but she didn't want to.

She wanted to live.

What followed was a blur, the sort she saw as though from a distance, well on the other side of the fight. Scraped and battered but breathing in air all the same. The man with the gun went first—not expecting someone who had taken a blow to the head like she had to be able to move quickly, if at all. She twisted his wrist and leveraged her strength to flip him over, sending the gun rattling across the pavement and well outside his reach. The other guy stared, his eyes wide with surprise, and that was as far as he got before her fist came crashing down on his head, and down he went, folding under himself and collapsing unconscious beside the girl, who was screaming again, even if the fear in her eyes had given way to something else. She was still screaming when Buffy turned her attention to the would-be gunman, who was cursing and swaying but trying to climb to his feet. She didn't blame him—it had happened fast. Too fast for someone like him to keep up.

"Don't feel bad," she told him as he inched his way toward the gun. Her voice was stronger than she was at the moment, her adrenaline taking a dive now that the danger was gone. In seconds, the awful ache in her head would make itself known again and she'd feel the place on her knees where the pavement had scraped and torn the skin away, but he didn't need to know that. "It was my fault. I should've known your friend wasn't the type to hunt little girls alone. What, were you waiting around the corner? The lookout? Do guys like you even do lookouts? You know what, I don't care. Point is if I *had* seen you, you wouldn't have gotten this far."

The man snarled something that sounded like a combination of *cunt* and *bitch*. Buffy grinned, even though grinning hurt, and closed the rest of the space between them.

"Some guys can dish it, but they can't take it," she muttered, then seized the asshole by his collar and slammed him face-first into the dumpster.

An unsettling quiet settled over the alley afterward—the sort that followed any fight, granted, but managed to feel displaced here, so far from her normal battleground, and looking at two unconscious men rather than two dead demons. The back of Buffy's skull throbbed harder, the last of her fight-rush leaving her feeling like a walking

bruise. She glanced to the girl, who was still crying but had thankfully stopped screaming, and now stared at her with wide, goggling eyes.

"What's your name?" Buffy asked, ignoring the whine of her bones and muscles as she bent over to collect the gun off the pavement.

The girl followed each move with rapt fascination. "H-Hannah."

"Hannah." She glanced at the gun. "Hannah, here's what's going to happen. You're going to take whatever you bought back into the liquor store."

"What? I—"

"No arguing. You're taking it back into the store, and you're going to explain what happened. All of it, whatever that is. You bought it and you shouldn't have, two guys were waiting for you, and someone stopped them. Have them call the police and *stay put* until the cops show up." Buffy swallowed. The gun was starting to feel heavy, meaningful, and she didn't like holding it. Didn't like that the weight of it was at all familiar. "Tell them what you want about me. I doubt they'll believe it."

There was a beat, then the girl, still trembling, managed to fight her way to her feet. "Should I believe it?"

The question was an odd one, though she had no trouble understanding it, and she answered with a shrug. "Probably better if you didn't."

From the relief that flooded her face, that was the answer Hannah had been hoping for. Buffy couldn't blame her—she wouldn't want to believe this, either.

It wasn't until she was certain Hannah had cleared the alley—until she heard the distant jostle of an entry bell being triggered—that she allowed herself to fully turn her attention back to the gun.

She forced herself to study it without blinking, without looking away, a little afraid but mostly exhilarated. Let the gun sit there in her hand, uncomfortable as it was, this choice. A choice she'd made then and one she'd made again tonight when the barrel had been pressed to her temple. Whether or not Frank would have gone through with it—pulled the trigger, ended a human life—didn't matter. Those seconds had happened, she'd lived them and couldn't unlive them, and in those

seconds, something had sparked inside her, warm and vibrant and scary but good.

Buffy released a sigh that made her whole body shake, then she brought the gun up close, worked out how to open the chamber, and watched with grim satisfaction as the bullets inside clanked noisily against the pavement.

EITHER SHE DIDN'T LOOK NEARLY as much like hell run over as she thought she did, or Vegas tourists and hotel attendants were predisposed not to consider anything too unusual. Buffy would like to think it was the former, but the few glimpses she'd caught of herself in various shiny surfaces told her the latter was more likely. Hell, the guy manning the kiosk where guests could purchase overpriced and undersized versions of things they might have left at home barely even blinked at her as she handed over the cash to cover a modest first-aid kit, some much-needed aspirin, and a bottle of water.

When she finally crossed the threshold into the room and came face-to-face with her reflection, though, she supposed it could have been worse. Her hair was mussed and dirty, yes, and there was grime on her hands and face; her palms were a bit torn up from where she'd hit the pavement, and her knees worse, but she didn't have a fat lip or a black eye. The bulk of the damage had come from the gun that had smashed against her skull, and that at least wasn't visible.

All in all, hardly the worst shape she'd been in following a fight. If it hadn't been for the head trauma, she doubted she would have broken a sweat. That guy had gotten lucky, or she'd gotten dumb, or some combination thereof. In a world full of monsters, it was hard at times to remember what horrible things people could do to each other. And maybe she'd been a little overconfident going in—or maybe part of her hadn't cared all that much. Torn between *what-ifs* and *what-nows*.

But that feeling that had followed her out of the alley had yet to dissipate. That sense of being, of right, of wanting to push forward, keep fighting. She had no idea if it would last beyond tonight, but maybe it didn't need to. Maybe simply existing at all, letting her know

she could feel that way again, was its true gift. If it left her again, that would suck, but she'd know it was there. And she'd know that she could get there again, even if the getting wasn't easy.

Buffy sighed and glanced around the room. No sign that Spike had been back, and, by his own estimation, it might be a while still. The overturned tray with the remnants of her dinner was where she'd left it and was likely the source of the somewhat funky smell hanging in the air. She moved forward on legs that protested with each step, heading first toward the safe to double-check its contents—and yes, the paw was still there—then headed for the bathroom. Best remedy for getting banged around, aside from chocolate, was a nice hot shower. She could deal with the mess after. And maybe order herself some decadent dessert that would look way better on the menu than it actually tasted. What the hell, she'd earned it.

Like most hotels, the water pressure left something to be desired. Not quite the hard blast she'd experience at home, or even what she'd come to expect from the set-up Spike had at his crypt. But it felt good at any rate, letting the water do its thing, wash away the evidence. She stood with her hands braced against the shower wall, transfixed by the sight of blood and dirt circling the drain at her feet. She hadn't bled much, granted, and the wounds were superficial, but she felt them all the same. A slight burn in her palms, the persistent pounding in her skull, her knees stinging every time the spray hit them directly. And for no reason, she found herself thinking about the night of her resurrection. How she'd stood in a bathroom that should have been familiar but hadn't been, looking into her reflection and wondering if she saw Buffy in herself at all. Who Buffy was, even, for that had seemed beyond her. She'd been in more than a daze then—it had been waking up and still finding herself in a bad dream.

The wounds she'd carried that night had been mostly superficial as well. The ones on the surface, at least.

Buffy lingered in the shower long enough for the water to run cold but scurried out before it could chill her too much. She forced herself into the sleep shorts and tank top she'd packed, then crashed on the bed—the one not covered in her dinner—and reached for the menu.

The clean-up she needed to do could wait until after she'd eaten dessert and tended to the parts of her that needed tending.

Yes, she was procrastinating. No, she didn't much care at the moment. A bit of damsel rescuage should be rewarded with calories before chores.

Then the door cracked open, and Spike stepped into the room.

"Bloody waste of time, that was," he grumbled by way of greeting. "Lot of big talk. No follow-through. Though good thing you didn't tag along, love. There was this bloke who—"

But that was as far as he got before he stopped short. All of him stopped, rather froze there in the doorway, his nostrils flared and his eyes wide. She knew what he saw. No shower could completely wash away the evidence of a fight, especially not from a vampire. So for a moment, he stared at her and she stared back, feeling oddly like she'd been caught doing something wrong, which annoyed her because she hadn't. Well, except for messing up one of the beds by accident, but she was prepared to deal with it and sleep on a stain if need be.

At last, he found his voice. "Get into a scrape?"

"Went for a walk," she said in a cool, measured voice. "Ran into crime in progress."

"Demons?"

She shook her head, then winced because doing that hurt. "Two guys jumped a girl outside of a liquor store. Well, one guy that I saw. The other guy was waiting or something. He clocked me over the head but, you know me, nothing I couldn't handle."

Spike nodded, edged in closer. "What all hurts?"

"Huh?"

He gestured at her legs. "Looks like that's healin' up all right. Can barely smell the blood anymore. Just your head, then?"

Buffy blinked, a bit thrown and not yet ready to relax. For some reason, she had expected something else—recriminations, annoyance or disappointment. Perhaps an allegation or two, an argument set to the tune of 'how dare you treat Buffy's body so carelessly?' Or maybe he'd think she'd done it again, gone out with a mind to hurt herself and gotten cold feet. For a flash, anything had seemed possible—anything

but this calm interest. It unnerved her. Spike didn't do calm. He did conclusions. Jumped to them at a hair-trigger.

"Uhh, yeah. I was planning on ordering myself something fattening, take some aspirin and then maybe clean up the room." She glanced at the other bed. "I was going a little stir-crazy earlier. The paw's in the safe—I made sure it was, well, *safe* before I left. Didn't expect you back so soon, I guess. Did it not go okay?"

"Did what not go okay?" he asked, studying her legs once more, that frown in place.

"Info on the paw. How to destroy it."

Spike met gaze again, still frowning as though he didn't understand the question. "No," he said, then cleared his throat and offered another nod. "Bloody dead end, that was. How bad's the head?"

"It's throbby, but I've had worse."

Another nod. He was doing that a lot.

Then, without warning, Spike was a blur of motion. Buffy tensed again, holding her breath as he stalked toward the desk, where the hotel staff had arranged an assortment of the expected amenities. For a wild second, she thought he might yank the coffeemaker from the wall, exorcise some of the tension riding him, but he didn't. Instead, he grabbed the empty ice bucket that sat beside it.

What the huh?

"Put your order in, love," he said, stomping his way back toward the door like this was normal behavior. "Be back in a mo'."

Well, that was nice and...confusing. Buffy scrunched up her nose and caught herself staring at the closed door well after he'd disappeared on the other side. Though she guessed she shouldn't be surprised—Spike never acted the way she expected.

There wasn't time to place a call for dessert. Spike reappeared in what seemed like seconds, this time strolling right to her with intent, ice bucket in hand.

"You order your tasty treat?"

"What?"

He shook his head at her, moved around the bed toward the shared nightstand, and put down the bucket. "Can never do what you're told, can you, Slayer?" he asked, though his voice was warm now.

"I... Huh?"

Spike snickered. "Give it," he said, nodding at the menu and shucking off his duster in the same stroke. She obeyed, still a bit dazed. A minute later, he'd phoned in an order of chocolate cake—extra icing, if they could manage—and a glass of red. Then he set the phone back on the cradle and met her gaze once more. If he saw anything there that surprised him, he didn't show it, rather made a swirling motion with his finger. "Turn," he said.

"Huh?" Great. She was in broken record territory.

"The blow you take knock somethin' loose? Been gawkin' at me ever since I came back."

"I..." Well, there wasn't anything to say to that. He was right, but that wasn't her fault, dammit. "I thought you'd be mad."

Spike's brow furrowed. "What?"

"Or...I dunno. Like I went out and tried to cause trouble or something."

"Slayer, think of who you're talkin' to." He snorted and spread his arms, and since he'd pretty much given her the invitation to, she looked. A lot. It was unfair, the way his clothes fit him. Even more unfair that she knew what all that fabric concealed. But Buffy didn't think that was the point he was trying to make. "Woulda been more surprised if you'd stayed in here all night. Not meant to be caged."

"It's just, when you came inside, you looked a little..."

Spike waited for her to finish the sentence, his eyebrows in full arch-mode. And she couldn't find the words. She didn't know how he'd looked—or what he'd been reacting to. It could've been the fact that she was on his bed and he'd specifically steered her toward the other one. Or maybe the smell from her dinner had caught him off guard. She'd gone on the defensive without provocation.

"Never mind," Buffy muttered, looking away. "Let's just go with yes. The blow knocked something loose."

He smirked at that, made the twirl gesture again. "Lucky you, I've got the magic touch."

"You've got the what?"

"Just turn around, love. Trust me."

Buffy licked her lips, flicked her gaze to his again, and she knew

instantly what he was thinking. It was one of those rare moments with this version of Spike when it was there, right there, and she didn't have to dig.

Do you trust me?

The answer was yes, of course. It came fast and easy. Which both surprised her and didn't. Buffy turned, presenting her back to him, and he didn't waste any time. The bed dipped as he climbed onto it, his weight familiar in ways that would have seemed impossible just a short while ago. A beat, then he was pulling her damp hair over her shoulder, the sensation of his hands both innocent and intimate at the same time. Something he'd done before, with his Buffy, and like so many other things, this body remembered even if she didn't.

"Girl make it out all right?" he asked in a low rumble right before he touched a sharp and cold something to her skin.

"Oh!" Buffy jerked, a full shiver tearing through her body, goose-flesh spreading in its wake. And to her great shock, the pain in her head dulled a bit. "What are you doing?"

"Feels better, yeah?"

It took her a second longer than it should have to realize the cold thing was ice. A second more for the realization to really hit home. She was with Spike in a hotel room, and he was rubbing ice along the back of her neck. Because that was what she needed—he'd known it. Like he'd known about watching *Clueless* back in his crypt, about the popcorn and Mr. Gordo. He just knew, and he got the things she needed, even when she didn't know what they were.

"Uhh, yeah," she said after a beat. "Feels better."

"That's what I'm doing," he replied. "Learned a trick or two over the last year. This is one of your favorites."

"I can see why." Buffy bit her lip to keep from moaning aloud when he started again. Now that the shock had passed and she knew what to expect, the touch wasn't just soothing. It was...good. Good in a way that she would never have imagined—both cooling the fire in the places that hurt and bringing the rest of her body to life. Dragging her attention to the sensation alone, which seemed to make it spread down her shoulders and arms, over her back and around her breasts and

lower still. It was just in one place but also in every place. Ice had never felt so good.

Then the ice was gone, melted, and it was just him, massaging her neck with cold, wet fingers. And he was better than the ice—god, so much better. Pushing against sore muscles, working through aches she hadn't realized she had, and all the while there were no questions. He wasn't grilling her on why she'd left. Why wasn't he grilling her?

She *knew* why, though. And she was just tired enough, just confused enough, warring between the sensations that had ridden with her to Vegas and the ones she'd be leaving with, to identify this as one of those moments that could be dangerous for both of them. Her nipples had gone all hard and every time Spike's fingers dug into her sore muscle, the urge to moan and melt into him, herself, became just shy of unbearable.

"Girl's...fine," she said at last, trying to focus on something safe. Neutral. "Thanks for asking. I know you don't care."

"You care," Spike replied, withdrawing his hand—which nearly made her sob before she realized he was just going for a new piece of ice. Not as good but she'd take it. "You care, I care. How it works, Slayer."

And that was it. The world she'd been living in, the one where she felt something and wanted what the other Buffy shared with Spike, that sensation of longing and loss that she had been wrestling with for days now, came crashing down on her. There were realizations that crept and realizations that had all the subtlety of a sucker-punch. For Buffy, the realization that she was in love with Spike was a goddamned supernova. Something that had been there, festering toward explosion for days, maybe even weeks, maybe longer. But once it went up, there was no going back. It created where it destroyed, making itself both obvious and unavoidable. There was before and there was now. There was no returning to the point before the blast.

She was in love with Spike.

Oh god, she was in love with Spike.

And there wasn't a damned thing she could do about it if she couldn't get home.

19

AND NOTHING REALLY MATTERS WHEN YOU'RE GONE

She tried to talk herself out of it.

God, she *really* wanted to talk herself out of it. Tried to summon some annoyance late the next morning when he woke up curled around her, even though it was her fault. She was the one who had gotten up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom, and then helped herself into Spike's bed on the return trip. He hadn't even commented on it upon finding her there. Hadn't sneered or rolled his eyes or made a quip about how she couldn't keep her mitts to herself. He'd just done what had become routine—stroked her awake, murmuring filthy suggestions in her ear as he rolled his hips and peppered kisses along her neck. Tortured her with hints of what could be until the moment passed and he remembered. Then he became the other Spike, the one who wasn't hers, the one who pulled back with an apology and proceeded to act like the whole episode just hadn't happened.

The jerk.

So she'd tried to talk herself out of it again when he'd stalked toward the bathroom to take a shower. Never mind the mental minefield *that* had been, her mind flooded with images of a slick, naked Spike running his hands over his body, through his hair, perhaps taking a detour down south to tend to the erection he'd rubbed

against her ass. While she'd managed to work up anger then, it had all been self-directed, and therefore a bust. It wasn't like dry showers were a thing. But then he'd been out of the shower, and it was her turn, and for a moment she'd thought she might have hit paydirt. The ass had left a wet towel on the floor and puddles of water near the tub. Which was rude, not to mention dangerous. Slip and fall hazard, much? Also not exactly a nice thing to leave the cleaning staff to deal with.

The indignation she'd summoned had been real, but it hadn't been strong enough to kill her love for him.

Nor had watching him fumble with the coffeemaker while bemoaning that he didn't have any blood on hand to give it the kick he really needed. Or the comment he made when they ordered breakfast about how he wished the Tabasco sauce he doused over his scrambled eggs had a bit more iron in it. He'd even winked at her after he'd said it, like she was in on the joke, like eating blood was something to laugh about.

Even worse, she had actually laughed.

Between breakfast and checkout, there hadn't been much to nitpick. They had collected the paw from the safe—he didn't even comment that she'd used her death date as the combination—settled up and made the mad dash to the car. Once they were on the road, though, he fiddled with the car radio and landed on some station that assaulted the ears on every conceivable level, and he made matters worse by singing along loudly to whatever tortured sound blasted through the speakers.

It was annoying and abrasive. But also cute. She caught herself watching him out of the corner of her eye, would feel her lips twitch like they wanted to grin. Because her lips were stupid. Like the rest of her.

At least there was the smoking. Thank god, because nothing about that gross habit could be called cute. Sure, he didn't have functioning lungs to worry about, but the smell was still offensively present. It clung to him much the same way his duster did, though unlike his duster, he could never shed it. Plus, he'd light up without warning. No consideration, no questioning look, no nothing. Hell, he didn't even

roll down the window. He just went about polluting the air she actually did need, thanks, which was definitely not a lovable quality.

Except some switch had apparently been flipped in her body because god help her, she liked the way he smelled. The combination of leather and smoke and *guh* that was uniquely his. And at last she'd given up the fight, waved the white flag and admitted what she'd known since last night. Likely well before last night.

She was screwed.

Love wasn't something to be talked into or out of. It wasn't logical, and it certainly didn't give a damn about things like *shouldn't* and *can't*. Love didn't care that Spike was a vampire, a soulless one to boot, and it couldn't possibly care less what that meant for Buffy. It was unimpressed with her counterarguments and rationalizations, with the litany of things she'd carried with her as undeniable truths for the past six years. It simply was. She was in love with Spike.

And it wasn't out of nowhere. These sensations had been with her for weeks, born out of the confused state he'd left her in after Glory, not at all tempered by time or even death, rather ready to be stoked when she'd seen him waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs. When he'd looked at her like she was a mirage or a dream, like he might start sobbing right there in the entryway. It had just grown from there. Sitting with him in the shadows outside of the Magic Box, telling him things she couldn't trust with anyone else. Stepping onto the back deck as Giles and Willow argued over the spell that had brought her back, grateful to be with someone who didn't expect her to wear a mask, do a dance, put on a show of being the girl they wanted her to be. She'd taken that with her to see Angel, hoping he'd make it grow even further, and it hadn't. She'd carried it with her to and from the cash-wrap at the Magic Box while trapped inside a loop she couldn't break, needing it and resenting it and wishing it were someone else, someone who wasn't Spike, because the things she felt shouldn't be felt for him. And ever since she'd landed here, through every bad decision she'd made, every wrong turn she'd taken, it had just gotten stronger. To the point where she could admit her draw to Spike was more than physical —that the more she'd seen of how it could be there, the more she'd wanted it.

All last night had done was put a label on the *something* she'd been feeling. Made her realize exactly what it was and how intensely she felt it.

So it was that when they were about an hour outside of Sunnydale, Buffy stopped trying to talk herself out of anything involving Spike. It was a done deal. And, as he'd said, love wasn't something she did in half measures. When she loved, it was with her full self—hard and desperate and painful at times, but with make-or-break intensity. A forever kind of love. Only better than her last forever kind of love, because this one actually felt like forever. Like there was nothing out there she could do or discover that would convince her it wasn't worth fighting for.

There was only the small problem of what happened next. If she were stuck here, she'd be constantly living in the shadow of a Buffy who had figured this out years ago. One she could never meet or match, and one to whom he was loyal. Memories were what built relationships after all, and though she had the right face and the right name, identical though she might be on a molecular level, she would never be the Buffy who had written him love notes and kept his in a box beside her bed. She would never be the Buffy he'd tried to teach to drive that one time, the one he'd built an entire bathroom for, the Buffy he reached for every morning. No, she would always be the Buffy he pulled away from. The one who had taken away the woman who belonged here. The one who had raped him, regardless of what he called it. The one who had nearly put a bullet in her own skull.

He said he loved her because she was Buffy. If it turned out that she was the closest thing to his Buffy he would ever get again, would that ever be enough? Would he ever be able to look at her and not wish she was a woman with a different history?

These questions didn't have answers. And if they did, she wasn't sure she was strong enough to hear them.

"Where are we going first?" she asked. The landmarks were becoming increasingly familiar as home drew ever nearer. "Straight to campus?"

Spike, who had still been singing at the top of his undead lungs to whatever was coming over the speakers, tossed her a surprised look as

though only then realizing she was sitting beside him. The trip back had been largely silent—a few times she'd asked him to pull over so she could empty her bladder and pick up a snack, but otherwise, he'd left her alone, either sensing she needed some time to her thoughts or needing time, himself. Now, though, he shifted out of that almost at once and twisted the knob on the radio so the sounds of might-be-called-music grew faint.

"To the witches?" he asked. "Reckon so, unless you need to check in with your honey first."

Buffy sighed but decided that debating over whether Angel was her honey was a wasted effort. It certainly didn't dissuade Spike from referring to him as such, no matter how many times she corrected him. "No need to check-in. I told Angel I'd be gone for a few days."

"Yeah? Gamblin' that Singer might not be so keen to cough up the goods once he got a look at the pair of us?"

"More gambling that it would give me more time between then and when I'd have to see him next."

Spike chuckled, not taking his eyes off the road. "Crafty as ever, Slayer. Yeah, seems as good a plan as any, I expect. See if the answer's changed at all. If havin' the bloody thing will help find your world."

Buffy pressed her lips together, nodding. She'd been thinking on that, too, though not with the dedicated focus it deserved. Getting the paw had been such a huge hurdle—all that came after had remained locked away, distant, better to not worry about until there was reason to worry. "I did talk to Willow," she said. "Last night, before I left and ran into those guys. She didn't have anything new."

"Havin' the bloody paw oughta tip it in our favor."

"Maybe."

He flicked her another a glance. "Come on, now. Where's that eternal bloody optimism? You do-gooders always save the day."

"Not always," Buffy said quickly. "Sometimes the day kicks our collective asses. Sometimes the day is a hellgod and there's nothing to do but jump."

The line of Spike's jaw hardened, as did the grip he maintained on the steering wheel. "It'll work," he said, and it was impossible to miss the steel in his voice. "Has to bloody work. You lot always find a way."

"Sometimes—"

"Bugger *sometimes*. Found a way with Glory, too. Only reason you had to jump was I didn't get to the top of the sodding tower in time. You woulda won if it weren't for that. All big heroes, like always." He released a deep breath as though begging for patience, flexed his fingers around the steering wheel again. "Like I said, it's what you do. There'll be a way."

The smart thing would have been to let it go—agree and wait until the moment was upon them, the one that would decide the way the pendulum would swing. But hell, Buffy hadn't gotten this far by doing the smart thing. And when she was in love, the smart thing became harder to see, much less care about. "Okay," she said slowly, trying like hell to keep her tone placating. "We're going to find a way. But... pretend for a minute like we don't. That the damage is done, and I'm stuck here for real. And your Buffy is...just gone. What happens then?"

He threw her an angry look. "Why's it matter?"

"Humor me."

"Not findin' much about this funny."

"Neither am I. I just *need* to know."

"What's it you need to know? Stop dancin' around it and just bloody ask me."

"What happens with us?" she blurted, her cheeks going hot and her heart, damned traitor that it was, taking off at marathon speeds. "I know I'm not... I know I'm not that Buffy. But you say you love me."

Spike pressed his eyes closed, like he was begging for patience. Not long but long enough that her racing heart suddenly felt like it had raced itself right off a cliff. Then his eyes were open again, fixed on what he could see of the road. "I don't *say* I love you," he ground out. "I do love you. You're Buffy. Can't help but love you, can I?"

"But I also took her away. I'm the reason she's not here."

"Think I've forgotten that, do you?"

"No. I know you haven't." She drew her lower lip between her teeth, brain tripping over itself to find the right words. The ones that would lead her to the reassurance she wanted, needed, the thing that would make the prospect of living in this world something she could survive. "I know what I've taken from you. And what I did to you—"

"Not interested in goin' over that again."

"I can't help but wonder these things." A pause. "If it turns out I am stuck here and she's in my world forever, I can't do it by myself."

He looked at her then, again just a glance but one long enough that she caught his confusion. "Who said anythin' about bein' by yourself?"

God, he was really going to make her spell it out. Buffy gripped her knees, which had just barely healed from the night before, and dug her nails into the skin there, relishing the thrill of pain that ricocheted through her in response. "Could you stand to be around me if I'm the reason she never comes home?" she said in a rush. "Would we still...be like this? Like we are now? Or would it... Could we..."

But that was as far as she got—the most she could make herself choke out. She'd asked something similar the night before she'd assaulted him, and he'd refused to answer. Or hadn't so much as refused as made the answer obvious in how he'd shut her down. And that should be answer enough, shouldn't it?

Nothing had changed since that night—not really. Nothing for him at least, except he knew now that she had it in her to do horrible things, things that she would never have believed of herself before that moment. What she'd learned there had done more than shake her foundation—it had redefined everything she knew about herself. And what had come after had redefined everything she knew about Spike, too. That he could forgive the unforgivable, catalog the entire experience as something ultimately insignificant. A lapse of judgment that had nearly cost her everything but had cost him nothing in the end.

Spike had loved her before, and he'd loved her after. Nothing else could explain how good to her he'd been since the incident. But there seemed little chance he could love her the way he loved the Buffy whose place she'd taken. And though she didn't deserve anything else, that didn't keep her from wanting.

"Wanna know if I'd leave you high and dry, is that it?" Spike asked at length. "Never. Could never do that to you."

"But—"

"Maybe one of these days you'll suss out that I don't say things I don't mean. That what you've been through was reason enough."

"To ruin your life?"

"Still here, aren't I?"

"Spike—"

"And you are too." Again, he flexed his hands around the steering wheel. "Love you no matter what, pet. Can't do anything but. Losing what we have..." He swallowed, and when she saw the telltale shine in his eyes, something inside of her twisted and broke. "Losin' that would bloody gut me. Knowin' it was out there, *she's* out there, tryin' to get home to me."

He stopped talking, and the silence was all-consuming. The sort she didn't dare try to break on her own, rather just sat there as he sniffed and wiped at his cheeks, his eyes still on the road. When he continued, though, it was with a forced sense of pep that reminded her startlingly of herself. "Still in a world that has you," he said. "More than I can say than those months when you were gone. Might not be the same, but you don't look at me like I'm a monster. Wouldn't be like it was before we loved each other. Not goin' back to anything. Just be something else. If she's over there and she has a version of me that loves her the way I do, then I know she's all right, don't I? Not a lot of blokes who can say that."

Buffy bit the inside of her cheek, that awful pressure building up behind her eyes, in her throat. She wanted to tell him she loved him, but it seemed the wrong moment. A selfish moment. Still too much like she'd be invading the space where another woman belonged, and truthfully, he deserved better than to have her love dumped on him. Maybe after they had their answer, knew for certain that she was stuck here or that she could go home. It would be right to tell him then.

As to whether or not she would ever feel like anything other than a consolation prize, she couldn't say. But it wasn't like she deserved any better.

WILLOW DIDN'T LOOK PARTICULARLY SURPRISED—OR pleased, for that matter—when she opened the door to the dorm she shared with Tara and saw them standing on the other side. "I was wondering if you'd be back today," she said. "You have the paw?"

Buffy held up the box. "Evil thing of evil at your service. How goes the dimension search?"

The answer was immediate—not in words but in the pained smile Willow gave her. One that brought the bags around her eyes into sharp relief. It was also in the way she held herself, hunched and defeated. No more eternal optimism. None of the confidence she'd pumped into their conversation the day before last. All of that was just gone.

"You guys better come in," Willow said with all the enthusiasm of a doctor ushering a patient to the deathbed of a sick relative.

Oh god.

Stupidly, as she moved forward, Buffy found herself scrambling to reassure the screaming in her head that Willow could be moody for any number of reasons, that it might not be tied to the dimension search at all. Maybe she'd gotten a really bad grade on a paper or something. Maybe the Amy rat had taken a chunk out of her finger. A few more seconds of *maybe* that she wanted to last forever because the truth was too final. Once she stepped inside the dorm, she stepped into knowledge she couldn't unlearn. The hall was safer, neutral, teeming still with possibilities, however remote. And Spike felt it too. She knew from the way he tensed almost at once, the mostly relaxed state he'd been in all day vanishing without ceremony. She wanted so badly to look at him but didn't think she could stomach what she knew she'd see.

The things she'd asked in the car felt heavier than they had before. She hadn't been ready to get to the end of the *what-if*. She hadn't been prepared for the answer to be tonight.

She'd thought there was time still. But there wasn't.

"It's bad, isn't it?" Buffy asked.

Willow gave a shaky nod. "Just... Let's not do this out here."

Now Buffy did glance at Spike—she had no choice—and her heart shattered.

The easy, reassuring grin that had been on his face just seconds before had faded, every inch of him rigid, almost shaking. If it was possible for vampires to age, he had. In the span of a minute or two, he looked every second of his one-hundred-plus years, hollow and terrified, but moving. Still moving. He managed a jerky nod, then

gestured for Buffy to precede him when Willow moved deeper into the room.

It was like stepping back in time, or perhaps a dream where the details were close to the mark if not completely perfect. The dorm wasn't the same one Willow and Tara had called home that last year during the fight with Glory, but it was in the same hall and the layout and decorations were much the way they had been preserved in Buffy's memory. It seemed more natural, too—more where they belonged than Revello Drive ever had.

"The paw's in there?" Willow asked after Spike had closed the door, her gaze locked on the case between Buffy's hands.

Buffy pressed her lips together, nodded. She glanced at Tara, who sat on the bed, a kind but also pained smile on her face, and her spirits plummeted even more. "You can't do it," she said in a rush. Now that she was inside, she wanted the band-aid ripped off. Drawing it out would just make everything worse. "You can't find my world, can you?"

Willow released a deep sigh, reaching for the case. "Can I see it?"

"Answer the question," Spike said in a low, dangerous voice as he came up to stand at Buffy's left.

Willow's lower lip wobbled, her eyes—eyes still fixed on the case—filling with tears. "We can't," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Not the way we were looking. There are just too many."

Buffy swallowed, her skin burning hot and a shrill ring filling her ears. "You can't?"

"I'm so sorry, Buffy." This from Tara, who slipped off the bed and started toward her, then stopped as though she remembered something—remembered she wasn't the Buffy they knew. As though that made a difference. "We don't know how many there are. Could be infinite, could be just...you know, a few billion."

"The only way to know which one is yours is to visit each world and ask each Buffy if they're where they belong," Willow said dully.

"So that's what you do," Spike said, looking between the two of them, furrowing his brow. "Pack a bloody bag and—"

"It's not that simple," Tara said.

"Then *make it* that simple," he replied, this time with a snarl. "She needs to come home."

Willow stepped in front of Tara, forcing his attention back to her. "We can't just go world-hopping," she said. "The energy and resources that would take would—"

"Do I look like I sodding care?"

"You look like you don't understand." Now Willow was frowning, and when she spoke again, her voice carried an edge to it. The same Buffy had heard only a handful of times, though all recently. The new Willow, the one bolstered by her confidence in her abilities, in her dead-raising and defiance of natural law. "There are billions. At minimum."

"Then it seems you're wastin' your time. Better hop to it."

"It just can't be done, Spike."

"Bugger *can't*. Told us just a day ago you'd never stop lookin'. Tune's changed just because it's not as easy as it sounded?" He stepped forward too, his jaw tight and his eyes practically on fire. "She's good enough to rip right on outta Heaven but not good enough to find when she's lost, is that it? Said it wouldn't work the way you were looking. Then bloody look another way."

Tara stepped around Willow, keeping her gaze fixed on the vampire. "Spike, even if we spent every second of every day looking for the next century, the likelihood of us finding the right world is really low."

"But not impossible," he pressed. "You could do it."

It was the crack that did it. The way his voice seemed to split, the way she knew that he was seconds away from begging. The awful pain in her chest fractured right along with him, jerking her from her thoughts, the dark despair pressing in upon her, and to him. It was like the scream he'd let out a few nights ago, the wail of a dying animal, only this time contained. This time consuming him from the inside out, shredding him into ribbons. And there was nothing she could do. She wanted to reach for him, take his hand, but she didn't.

"I'm sorry," Tara said, and now she was crying too.

"What about the paw?" Spike turned to Buffy in a flash and practically tore the case from her hands, then thrust it against Willow's chest. "Thought that could help, didn't we? Got it for a reason."

But Willow was shaking her head, staring at the case but not taking

it. "We've been working on that all day," she said. "Well, since last night, really. I told you that—Spike, stop it. It's not going to work." For he still had it pressed against her flesh, as though she would snap to herself and realize he meant for her to have it. "The paw is not the same as the one Buffy used," she said, looking to Buffy now. "It's like I said the other day. There's not a unique thing over there that you don't have here—like Anya's amulet. Just like we're doubles of your friends, the paw is a double of that. It's not the paw that granted your wishes, so it won't have any residual magic for us to look at. And destroying it?" She barked a laugh. "If we could, it wouldn't do anything but undo all the wishes it's granted. But it didn't grant *your* wish. The one in your dimension did."

Spike stepped forward, shaking in that way he did when he was fighting for control. "You said you could use it," he said in a low growl. "You said gettin' the paw—"

"I was wrong!" Willow snapped, her eyes wide, almost manic. "I was wrong. I didn't know—I thought I could. But—"

"So you're not even gonna try now that we have the sodding thing?" Spike snarled, turned on his heel and hurled the case against the nearest wall hard enough that it cracked the plaster before crashing to the floor. "What the bleeding hell was the point in all that if you're just gonna give up?"

"I'm not giving up! Accepting that something can't be done isn't the same as giving up."

"There's *always* a way and you bloody well know it."

"Not like this!" Willow shouted, strands of her hair suddenly standing on end, crackling with static energy.

And Buffy saw her eyes, saw how close *she* was to losing it, and in seeing that saw how very badly the next few minutes could go if she just stood there and let it happen. So she moved forward, put herself between them and into Willow's line of sight so that her glare had nowhere to go but where it belonged. This was, after all, her mess.

"The paw won't help?" Buffy repeated. "Why didn't you tell me this last night when I called?"

Willow stared at her for a few hard seconds, her chest heaving with the weight of the breaths she took. "I hoped Anya was wrong," she

said at last. "She's who... She's been saying ever since we started looking that it's useless for exactly these reasons. But she looked anyway. She kept looking and telling us it was pointless, and we kept not listening." She wet her lips. "So finally I cracked and summoned D'Hoffryn."

"D'Hoffryn?" The name was familiar, but Buffy couldn't immediately place it.

"The big kahuna in the wish-giving division of demonic magic," she said. "He... Two years ago, after I did the spell that made my will, well, the rule? He left me his talisman." At that, she glanced down, her cheeks going a bit pink. "He thought I had good vengeance demon potential."

Buffy narrowed her eyes, a surging with familiar annoyance and concern. "And you kept it? This thing that could make you a vengeance demon?"

"Oh, believe me, we're going to have that talk," Tara said in a low, un-Tara-like voice that made Willow flinch. "But first, tell them what he told you."

Willow favored her girlfriend with a mournful look, swallowed and met Buffy's gaze again. "What Anya has been saying," she muttered. "That and...more. Essentially, anything that's a duplicate can't be used to undo the wish. It has to be a constant. We also learned that like vengeance demons, the paw wants to be used. It wants to be used in a very specific way—the way it knows it can reap the most pain. It gets into your head the longer you're around it, even twists the way you make your wishes because you're not thinking clearly. The more damage it does, the more powerful it becomes. It wants that." She eyed the case still on the floor, and something caught between disgust and yearning flickered across her face. "So you can't keep it here."

"What?" Buffy asked, though she had heard correctly. "But—"

"Please, Buffy," Tara said softly, placing a hand on Willow's shoulder. "It really can't be here. And whatever you do, don't open the case."

"Have you?" Willow asked suddenly, straightening. "Have you opened it?"

Buffy glanced to Spike, who was staring at the floor, his expression

completely blank. "Uhh, yeah," she said. "A couple of times. Just to make sure it was in—"

But Tara was moving then, hurrying to the desk beside the bed. She opened one of the drawers and drew out a small, clear vial before returning. "Hold still," she instructed, uncorking the thing and dabbing a dollop of its contents on her forefinger. Then she streaked the substance across Buffy's brow, and Buffy felt something inside of her loosen. Something she hadn't even realized was tight. "There," Tara said. "You too, Spike."

"What is this?" Buffy turned back to Willow. She didn't think she could take Spike's haunted, empty eyes just now.

"Antidote that D'Hoffryn gave us," she said, still staring at the case on the floor. "Breaks the connection the paw forges with your mind the second you look at it. The case helps too—it's warded so long as it's in there, it shouldn't be able to affect you unless you handle the thing."

Buffy's throat tightened. "Anya... In my world, Anya didn't... Why didn't she just do that? She handled the paw, too. She had to."

"Anya didn't know," Tara told her, stepping away from Spike. "Apparently, vengeance demons—even former vengeance demons—are immune to it, so that's not something she ever had to learn for herself."

"But she said the paw was competition," Buffy retorted heatedly. "If it was competition, why the hell didn't she know how it worked?"

The tight feeling from before had started to burn and rise, heating her skin and making her pulse thunder. It needed an outlet—a place to unleash and rage, and Anya was a great target. She was the one who had been there in the basement, after all, the one who had caught Buffy trying to sell the monkey's paw. She'd known just enough to tell her what it was, that it granted wishes, and then she'd left her with it. For hours.

Though the *hours* thing wasn't quite true. It had just been true for Buffy. Only Buffy. Even the woman who had come in for the mummy hand had gotten a reset—the only person who knew Buffy had ever handled the paw was Buffy herself. The subsequent trips down to the basement had been do-overs. And over. And over.

"Anya knew how it worked," Tara replied with a kind, patient smile. She had collected the case again and handed it to Spike, who took it without protest, his eyes a thousand miles away. "It grants wishes. Same as she did. And same as she did, it talks people into doing it, only not with words. She just took for granted that it stopped with the sales pitch once it was out of sight." She paused. "I'm so sorry, Buffy.

She heard the finality there, understood that the conversation was over, that they had shared as much as they had to share. And though Tara was too good to say anything outright, Buffy also understood that she needed to leave, that the witches had further things to discuss. Things like the demon talisman, which was perhaps tied to the reason Willow had mentioned the paw couldn't stay with them, encased or not. There were things going on there that were outside of Buffy and her problems. Buffy couldn't be fixed. It was certain now.

Somehow, she managed to negotiate her way out of the room, through the halls that had once been familiar, until she was outside again. Gulping deep, needed breaths that had seemed out of reach within those walls, breaths that didn't quite manage to ease the screaming in her head or the awful, gaping maw that consumed her chest, but felt good anyway.

Spike kept silent as they walked, the case bunched under one arm. He didn't speak when they reached the car, either, just tossed the box into the backseat, waited for her to get situated beside him, then fired up the engine. When they passed the place she knew he kept the DeSoto, she thought about asking him where they were going but decided against it. Instead, she kept quiet, even as he pulled into an empty spot on Main Street, killed the lights, grabbed the case, and slinked out again.

Buffy climbed out with him, having to jog a bit to catch up with him, as he was moving as though he were alone. It took a single turn for realization to hit, and by the time they were at the Magic Box, she'd fumbled her keys free from her pocket to open the door and let him inside. He barely broke his pace, rather strode right over to the door that led to the downstairs and disappeared from sight.

It was the right thing to do, she thought. If he kept the paw at the crypt, that little voice might start singing to him. Whisper all sorts of

lies that could persuade a brokenhearted man into doing something desperate in a bid to make things better. Even with the antidote Tara had smeared across his forehead. Even knowing just how wrong it could all go—*would* all go—firsthand. It was the same reason Buffy had locked the case up in a safe. Part of her had known, or perhaps recognized, the tickle in her brain. It might have taken a few days, even weeks—however long it had in real-time back in her world—but eventually that tickle would've become impossible to ignore. The tickle was gone now, but it could come back. And if Spike got the urge to study the thing, try to destroy it despite knowing he couldn't, despite knowing it wouldn't help, all it would take was a glance to allow the paw to begin its slow seduction.

That he knew that, that he was removing it from temptation, showed strength she wouldn't have credited him with. All it did was make her love him more.

Spike returned after a handful of seconds, and when he met her eyes—looking at her for the first time since they'd left the dorm—he nodded as though to say it was done. They headed back to the car, though only to grab the overnight stuff they'd packed, apparently, then started on foot for Restfield, side-by-side.

He made it a step inside his crypt. The homey crypt he'd built for Buffy, the place she lived with him even though she couldn't actually live with him, before he cracked. Whether it was the sight of the weapons chest that held her favorite toys, the kitchenette where he kept her favorite foods, or the couch where they had cuddled watching her favorite movies, Buffy didn't know. Maybe it was the simple virtue of being in his own space, in a place he felt safe, that allowed him to do it. But when he crashed, he crashed hard, an awful, guttural scream ripping from his lips as his knees hit stone and his body collapsed in on itself. He braced his hands on his thighs, then covered his face, shuddering in hard, rasping cries that left her ruined.

And Buffy didn't know what to do. She stood there like an idiot, watching as the man she now knew she loved bawled and sobbed his grief over a life she had taken away from him. A life involving her but not *her*. A life he'd believed, with foolish optimism, he could find his

way back to. Believing in *her,* her ability to pull off the impossible even when everyone else had given up.

He'd pinned so much on her and she'd failed him. Him and the other Buffy. The one whose place she'd taken.

That was all she did. Fail. Make things worse. Spike didn't need that right now. He didn't need her rubbernecking him like this. He needed space and time away from her. She knew he did because that was the last thing she wanted to give him now. She wanted to crawl up in his lap and entwine herself around him. Wanted to share this, awful as it was, but she wasn't strong enough to do it right—the way he had the day he'd kept her from killing herself. She wanted what he needed too, and she didn't have enough for them both.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, taking a step back toward the door. The words tasted cheap. They *were* cheap. There wasn't enough sorry in the world.

But words didn't matter. Nothing did. Spike didn't even flinch at the sound of her voice, just kept making those awful noises, barking those terrible cries.

All within sight of a living reminder of what he'd lost.

So, for the first time since she'd arrived here, Buffy decided to truly put him first, and forced herself to walk away.

20

FOUR, THREE, TWO, ONE, I'M LETTING YOU GO

The light in the living room was on, which meant either Angel was home or he'd decided electricity was one of those things they could afford to burn. For a long stretch, Buffy stood in the front yard, studying the glow of the lamp behind the curtains and going over the speech she'd rehearsed on the way here a final time.

She'd promised Spike what seemed like a lifetime ago that if they discovered she was truly stranded in this world, she'd tell Angel everything. At the time, she hadn't been sure she meant it. A torrent of confused emotion and fear had been guiding her then. The same was true now, but that wasn't the whole of it. She still had the certainty she'd found in the alley in Vegas. It had taken a number of blows earlier but somehow, despite everything, remained undefeated. If anything, watching Spike shatter had only cemented it.

She wanted to be where he was from this point on, and she couldn't do that while pretending to play house with Angel. She also owed it to Spike to give herself completely. Not leave a Plan B in the wings in case he decided, as he very well might, that she wasn't welcome in his crypt anymore. That the Buffy he was mourning now was the only one he'd ever give himself to. That would hurt—damn, it would crush her—but she would accept it. And, eventually, she would heal.

In some ways, she thought she'd be healing forever.

Buffy let out a deep breath, her pulse leaping when she pushed her feet forward. She so hoped Angel was home—better to get this over with now. The future was more than uncertain and she wasn't sure she could balance psyching herself up for an emotionally exhausting conversation while also nursing a broken heart. Doing it while feeling the way she did now was difficult enough.

Much like the first night, Buffy was greeted by voices from the television upon crossing the threshold. That was a good sign, so she let herself relax a little, but only a little, as she turned to close the door. At the *thump* that sounded, the volume in the next room took a dramatic dive.

"Buffy?" Angel was in the doorway the next second, his expression a combination of anxious and relieved. And despite herself, she felt her heart lurch. He hadn't looked quite so much like himself as he did now. It didn't change anything, didn't make her feel any differently, but the pang was there all the same. Like gazing into a photo of a time long past and remembering how she'd felt the day it was snapped. An echo of a different version of herself.

"Hey," he said, moving forward. "I thought you'd... You said you'd be a few days."

She shrugged. "Turned out a few days weren't needed."

"So did you get it? Did the guy have the paw?"

"He did."

A smile, a genuine smile, stretched across Angel's face, and she felt that pang again. "That's great!" He stumbled a step forward then stopped almost at once, as though he'd remembered something. Maybe that they weren't on hugging terms. He recovered quickly, though, sliding his hands into his pockets and affecting the detached air that seemed to define him these days. "I have some news."

"I have something I need to tell you first," Buffy said, and almost winced when he stopped, nodded. Then the floor was hers and she forced herself to start blurting truths before she lost her nerve. "I used it. I used the paw."

"You what?"

"I used the paw, Angel." She took a step back, wrapping her arms around herself. His face had gone blank. "I can't remember how many days it's been. A few. Just a few. But I used it."

"I don't..." Now Angel took a step back too, his mouth pulling all the way into a frown. She knew that frown. "I thought you didn't know where it was."

"I didn't. Once I got here." Buffy exhaled, rubbed her lips together in a bid for time, but she'd run out of that and it was too late now to double back. "When I came home the other night—you went out to play cards. I'd been at the Magic Box all day... God, this is hard to explain and you'd really think I'd be a pro by now."

"What are you—"

"I'm not the woman you married."

Another pause, this one less confused but only a little. "I know," he said slowly. "We've both changed. That's what I was getting at the other night when—"

"I mean I am *literally* not the woman you married. I've never worn a wedding dress. I've never walked down an aisle. I've never kissed you in the sunlight." Buffy forced herself to hold his gaze, even as it became stony. Even as her head started to ring and her heart thump in double-time. "At least not that I remember. Where I'm from, you live in Los Angeles and you're still very much a vampire. Cordelia works for you, as does Wesley. As in Watcher Wesley. And—I can't remember, but you mentioned a couple of people I don't know when we talked."

Angel's breaths were coming harder. "When we talked."

"Right after Willow did the spell. The one that brought me back."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I know. Because it wasn't you. I mean, it was, but a different you. A you who decided to turn back the clock the day you became human." She dropped her arms and balled her hands into fists. Anything to steel herself. "I used the monkey's paw when I found it at the Magic Box. Giles had bought it. He got to buy it himself because he's alive there. I'm not sure when he did—the seller initially wanted to mail it, so maybe that's how."

"You're not making any sense."

"I made three wishes," she continued, her voice beginning to wobble. "I don't remember exactly what I said, but the gist of the wishes was you, Dawn, and financial security. In my world, Dawn is... Social Services is breathing down my neck. They keep threatening to take her away if she doesn't improve her performance in school and she just doesn't seem to realize how serious it is. I think she's just used to me saving the day so what's a little government bureaucracy when your sister's the Slayer?"

Angel closed his mouth, the confusion in his eyes fading a bit.

"I must have wished something to do with family," she continued, losing the battle with herself and dropping her gaze to the floor. "That's why she's not here. For her to stay with family, she'd have to go to Dad. Then there was the money wish." She paused, thinking about the life she'd been so eager to leave behind, a pang of yearning for that Buffy's problems striking her hard and making her eyes burn even more. "It's *bad*, Angel. The house is falling apart. There are all kinds of bills piled on from when Mom was sick. And groceries and lights and school supplies and I have no job. Not one that pays, anyway. They brought me back from the dead and handed me a bunch of bills that I'm supposed to handle and I can't. So that was my second wish. I wished for money."

She stopped talking, realizing that Angel hadn't tried to interrupt her again. Wondered if that meant he was hearing her at last, understanding what she was telling him, yet not sure that she was brave enough to look up to find out.

"So that's why Giles isn't here," she continued, forcing the words out. "That's what the paw does. It gives you what you want but the cost is... I killed Giles."

There was a shuffle like he'd taken a step. "Buffy," he said, but that was all he said. And he didn't come any closer. She didn't blame him.

"I'm *not* your Buffy," she said as calmly as she could manage. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. The wishes I made are the reason I'm here."

He was quiet for a stretch. Still, she didn't look up.

"How long?"

"A few days. I came home from the Magic Box and you went to play

poker. I slept on the couch. You broke the coffeepot the next morning."

"And you didn't think this was something you should—oh, I dunno—tell me?"

Buffy snapped her gaze to his without thinking and found him staring at her with that unnerving focus. "Angel, I was still trying to work out what had happened. How my wishes had...turned into *this*. You were here. Human and *here*. And Giles was gone and Dawn... I came here and found out that the one person I thought I could always count on had shipped my sister off to my father."

"You just said that was because of your wish."

"Yeah, it was. But you're the one who fulfilled it. Who took *off* after I died, blew a bunch of money doing god-knows-what. In my world, my friends took care of my sister." That was being generous, she knew, but she didn't want to bring up Spike yet. She had a feeling once she did, the conversation would never get back on course. "I left to see if I'd dropped the paw at the Magic Box—if there was something I was missing. If there was something I could fix. I *wanted* to fix it. I wished myself here because I thought it would make my life better than it was there."

"Yeah?" he asked hotly. "And did it work?"

"I dunno, Angel, you found the gun. What do *you* think?"

The second the words were out, sharp and biting, she felt kind of cheap saying them, as though she were minimizing what had happened that day, what had gone through her head and lingered there at the periphery. But Angel reeled as though she'd struck him, and that was what she'd wanted. Hell, it was her trauma. She could use it as she saw fit.

When he spoke again, it was in a gentler, subdued voice. "That's why you tried... Why you considered doing that? Not Heaven?"

Buffy crossed her arms, looking away, the thoughts that had bullied her into propping the barrel under her chin resurging from the fog she had left them in. Grasping and parasitic and there, always there, even if the pull felt distant now. "It was Heaven," she said. "Heaven is the reason I made the wishes in the first place. I wanted something better,

something to make the pain of what I lost more bearable. And instead I got this."

For a span of seconds—seconds that might have been hours—neither of them spoke. Just stood there in the foyer of her mother's home with the weight of things both said and unsaid.

"Where is my Buffy?" he asked at length, his voice strained.

"I don't know. It's possible we traded places and she's in my world. A world where she's not married to you, Giles is alive, and she has money problems but Dawn's there, too." She breathed. "It's also possible she's just...nowhere. That I completely took her place."

"How do we get her back? Get *you* back?"

"You don't." Buffy stared forcibly at the tips of Angel's shoes, watched him shift his weight between his feet. "We thought destroying the paw would do it, but it won't. It's not the right paw. The paw that needs to be destroyed is the one I used to make the wishes. So maybe, if she's there, she'll figure it out. But Anya says the paw can only be destroyed one way and that way doesn't exist anymore. Willow was looking for my dimension, too, but that's...apparently impossible. There are too many other worlds and we don't know which one is mine."

"So the others know about this."

She nodded. "They know."

"And you're just now telling me."

"I was hoping I wouldn't have to tell you at all. I was hoping they would find a way for us to switch back, or for me to go to the world I belong in. But that's not happening. So this is the me you're stuck with. A Buffy who made wishes that made the world. And the last wish is the reason you're here." Buffy waited, breathed out a long, slow breath, then lifted her gaze to his once more. Those deep eyes that had once been a source of such comfort, a piece of herself she'd thought she'd keep forever. She had never been good at reading Angel—she might have fooled herself into thinking she was at one point, but standing here, now, she knew the truth. And he'd never been forthright with what he was feeling, either, which had driven her crazier than she had admitted at the time. So crazy she'd tried to read his mind once, only to have that backfire spectacularly. It hadn't been until the end

that she'd known what was going on in his head but only because he'd finally offered it. When he'd told her he was leaving. "I never got over you. At least, before I died. I was with someone and it... I didn't realize until after we broke up just how much I didn't give him. Because he wasn't you."

Angel was breathing hard again. It looked weird on him.

"That wasn't the only reason it didn't work with Riley," Buffy went on. "I think a lot of what's happened here is the same as what happened there, only with more resentment and...whatever it is that we were doing. Riley felt like he wasn't enough for me. You feel the same way. I think he needed to be needed. It wasn't enough that I wanted him there." A beat. "And then there's Spike."

"Spike?" He pounced on the name like he had been waiting for it, or maybe that was all in her head. "What about Spike?"

"Spike fell in love with me last year, before Glory." Buffy waited again, and again felt her pulse tick up when Angel's expression remained unchanged. "You don't look surprised."

"Well, it's been kinda obvious," he said, turning and walking toward the stairs. For a second, she thought that might be the end, that he'd heard enough, but then he planted himself halfway up the staircase. Somehow, he still managed to tower over her when he sat. "Everything he did... If you're not...*my* Buffy, do you know what he did here?"

"You mean with Glory."

"He nearly let her tear him apart. Wouldn't give up Dawn." He braced his elbows on his knees, lacing his fingers together. "I knew then. And after you died."

Was that all he'd known? Buffy dug her nails into her palms to stay the need to bark questions, to preemptively confess to a crime she technically hadn't committed yet felt responsible for all the same. She'd wondered at the start of this if Angel knew, had convinced herself that he couldn't or else he would have thrown it in her face. That she might have been wrong had her feeling off-balance and she didn't like it.

"You never told her?" Buffy asked, grateful for his human senses, that he couldn't hear the racket her heart was making.

"No," Angel said, staring at his hands. "I thought... Spike has always

wanted what's mine. I thought that's all it was. He was here and chipped, started patrolling with you. And"—he snickered—"he's always had a thing for slayers."

She waited for him to say something accusatory, but it didn't come. Slowly, she released a breath and tried for a smile that felt strained as hell. Angel didn't catch it, fortunately. He still wasn't looking at her.

"That's...more or less what happened in my world," Buffy said. "I kinda brushed it off until I couldn't anymore, but it's real. I know that now. He proved himself to me with what happened with Glory and everything after. Stayed in Sunnydale and fought alongside my friends while I was dead. Watched Dawn like a hawk. And when Willow brought me back, he was the only one I could be around. Everyone expected me to be so happy and thankful. Spike didn't. He was the only one I told about Heaven. He was where I went when I needed to just be miserable. To be *me* as I am now."

Angel looked up sharply, his eyes full of comprehension. "You're in love with him."

Here it was. Somehow, the first time Buffy would admit aloud that she loved Spike, it would be to Angel. As strange as that was, it also seemed somewhat fitting. They could do nothing the easy way.

Buffy held the gaze of the man who was her husband and nodded. "Yeah, I am. But I wasn't then. Or I didn't know I was. I knew hanging out with him wasn't good—that I was having feelings I shouldn't and maybe I was just going nuts. But then you wanted to see me and I thought it would be like that with you. You were such a part of me for such a long time, even after you left. It didn't work out with anyone and that was partly because I just...wouldn't give myself to them the way I did you. Your leaving crushed me. And suddenly you wanted to see me and it was like, maybe I can have that again. Maybe it can be like it was and I so wanted it to be. But it wasn't. *We* weren't. And that was hard."

In talking about them, those feelings resurfaced—echoes of that hope, that desperation, that ache for the Buffy she had been at one time. And she found herself envying this world's Buffy so much she could hardly breathe. The Buffy who had seen the results of that longing, who had gotten everything she'd ever thought she wanted only to

discover it wasn't what she wanted at all. She knew, she felt, that she didn't love Angel anymore, not like that, but losing that piece of her still hurt. It was like saying goodbye to the most innocent version of herself that she'd known. To a time when her problems, which had seemed insurmountable, had revolved around her love life and that alone. It had been hell to get through, but a hell that felt laughably small in the face of everything that had followed. Glory. Mom. Death. Rebirth. Heartbreak, for all its pains, seemed so much easier to navigate in hindsight.

"I thought maybe it was because we just didn't know how to be together anymore," Buffy continued. "At all. There was one time when you were the thing I was surest of and I wanted that back. I *needed* it back. So I made a wish."

Angel was rigid. Like he'd forgotten what they were talking about, how it was that she could be describing a world he hadn't experienced in the first place. That rigidity brought back the hardness from earlier—that and something else as the full weight of everything she had confessed took root. And she watched as his human body began to betray him, showing her what his expression concealed. His skin went red, his chest rising and falling at a quicker pace, his mouth a firm line against a jaw she now saw was clenched tight.

"I didn't know it would do this," she said, gesturing at him. Unable to stop now, needing to go on until it was all out. "I didn't say anything about you being human. I just wanted us to be...us again. And then I got here. And we're married, and Giles is dead, and Dawn is gone. We're married and you can't stand me."

"We're married," he repeated, terse. His lips hardly moved. "And you just got here."

For a long beat, neither of them spoke. Buffy just stood there, watching Angel as he absorbed, as he understood, flickers of emotion breaking across his face every few seconds but smothered before she could get a close enough look. And she felt another pang, not for the man he'd been or the relationship they'd had, but for everything she was costing him now. Preparing for his anger, knowing she deserved it.

"The other night," he said, looking at her again. "You came home

and asked how we'd gotten the way we are now. You were seriously asking."

"I was. I thought maybe the paw had changed you. Made you someone else."

"Did it?"

Buffy swallowed. "No."

He released a slow breath, seeming to deflate along with it. "I'm sorry to disappoint you," he said, this time with some bitterness she couldn't ignore. "I didn't want this, you know. I didn't want any of this."

"I know."

"But you, you begged me to stay. And I knew I shouldn't. I knew it was the wrong call."

"For you."

"No, dammit, for you. For us." He waved a hand between them, renewed fire flashing behind his eyes. "The Oracles told me that you would die. And you did."

"Yeah, I did," Buffy said, narrowing her eyes. If he wanted brownie points, he had come to the wrong girl. "It was never about me, though. I don't know if that's something you actually believe or something you want me to believe, but it's not true. Did you not hear the part where I died? Spike was the only one I could be around? I just said it."

Angel closed his mouth, some of the irritation in his face loosening. "You died."

"Yeah. And guess where you were?" She didn't give him time to answer. "Nowhere. Or maybe off in some other dimension rescuing Cordelia, based on what you told me. All I know is I didn't get help. I didn't even get a warning. And it's not like there weren't opportunities, because you came to town after Mom died and we sat for hours under a tree in the cemetery, talking about everything."

"Buffy—"

"I'm not blaming you. I don't know what those Oracles told you. Maybe you thought just rewinding the day would be enough to stop it." Though still, she couldn't help but think a head's up would have been nice. "What I am telling you is that your saying that—telling the other

me that you would've stopped my death—is a load of crap. You did *nothing* to prevent me dying."

Angel blinked at her for a few seconds, then sprang to his feet again in an explosion of movement. "How do you know it happened?" he asked hotly, coming back down the stairs.

"What?"

"If you're from a world where I'm still a vampire, how do you know that day happened at all? Maybe it didn't. Maybe I never got the warning. Maybe—"

"I showed up at your office after you swooped into Sunnydale behind my back because a friend of yours had a vision. Call me crazy but conspiring with my watcher to spy on me didn't leave me with the warmest of warm fuzzies." Buffy tried not to relish the way his face fell, but a part of her did anyway. It was nice feeling like she had all the cards for once. That she was at least on even footing with him, when he'd always seemed to loom over her. "While I was there, a demon crashed the party. You knew how to handle it and did, like, super-fast. And that was it. I left and you went on...doing whatever it was you were doing."

She paused again to give him the chance to weigh in, deny it, try to rationalize it away. He didn't. He just stood there looking at her in such a way she knew his mind was racing even. It used to drive her insane, that look—knowing there were things he was keeping from her. Thoughts he wasn't sharing, pieces of himself he refused to give to her the way she had given all of herself to him.

"It was never going to work out," she said a moment later. "Not for us. That's what being here has shown me."

"I gave up being a vampire for you." He said it with neither condemnation nor accusation, nor as an excuse. Just a statement of fact.

"That's just it—you gave it up. It was a thing you wanted to keep."

He stiffened.

"I don't think you knew that at first," Buffy went on. "But it's true. You said as much the other night. You had a destiny and being with me took that away. You knew how to be a vampire but not a man. You haven't been happy here. With me."

"I wanted to be. We were, for a while."

"And then Faith."

"How much do you know?"

"Spike's told me pretty much everything."

"Spike has." There was no inflection in his tone, no obvious question mark, but she heard it just the same. "And you're in love with him."

"Yeah." And now she hesitated again. She'd vowed to share everything, put all of it on the table, but the fact remained that learning about the affair would hurt him. No matter how he felt about her now or what had been going on in their marriage—infidelity was never fair and admitting it would be admitting to a crime she still couldn't entirely reconcile having committed. The pieces were there, the steps that had led her to Spike behind Angel's back, but seeing how they fit—even understanding why—didn't make it better or right. And she wondered if that was the reason the other Buffy had never been brave enough to leave Angel. If it was because doing it would mean facing the fact that she had become someone unrecognizable to her and pretending was easier. Until it wasn't, at least.

There was also the fact that telling Angel about Spike might make Angel do something drastic, like go after him with a stake.

She would just have to be sure to get there first.

So, with borrowed courage, Buffy forced out the last and worst of the secrets. "Your wife has been having an affair with Spike for a year, give or take."

The silence that followed was sharp, as though she'd stabbed him, and in looking at him, she felt like she had. All the questions she'd had, wondering if he knew, if he suspected, died an abrupt death. And though Buffy was no stranger to death, had experienced more than she could handle, watching this one was something like torture. The pain there was real, deep and heartfelt, and despite whatever had changed between them to bring them to this place, she hated inflicting it. Hated knowing she had caused it, in some form or another. Hated every second.

Then the silence was over, and Angel was grappling with the air.

Trying to pull it into his lungs, remain above water. "What?" he managed a second later.

Buffy sniffed, battling back the urge to cry. This was one time she hadn't earned it. "She has. I couldn't believe it at first but...whatever you've been feeling, about the distance between you two, you haven't been crazy to feel it. She loved him too. Or loves him, wherever she is. And it's been killing her," she added. Because she couldn't imagine it not.

"Killing her," he repeated, the words somewhere between a laugh and a shout, his voice cracking. "Well, I hate to hear that. Must be just devastating."

What she saw in his eyes made her broken heart cry out. "I don't mean—"

"I knew it. God, I *knew* it."

"You knew it?"

"Well, I knew something!" he snapped, jerking his head back up. "I knew she wasn't happy. I knew it. I *knew it* and she refused to tell me."

"I'm sorry. God, Angel, I am so sorry."

"Why?" The crack had become an edge and his jaw tight all over again. "Not like it was *you*, is it?"

"It would have been me. If you'd made the decision over there that you did here."

The air between them fell silent, though a heavy sort of silent. Like all the others had been. Finally, Angel looked down, then up again. "Are you done?"

Buffy inhaled, wanting to stop but knowing she couldn't. "No. As far as I can see, you two have been playing chicken with each other since the honeymoon ended. Everything you said the other night, about her not wanting to admit that she'd made a mistake. I think that was true. I think..." She shook her head. "It's hard, giving up something you thought you wanted. Admitting that you were wrong. And I don't like admitting when I'm wrong. I was wrong about us and I didn't want to be. To make matters worse, I was responsible. You wouldn't have made that decision if it weren't for me. This is something I got us into. I think she felt like if she left you, you'd have nothing."

"Well, I'm glad you're here to tell me that, Other Buffy," he snapped, turning and presenting her with his back. The urge was there to move forward, touch his shoulder, impart some comfort, but that wasn't her place and she wasn't welcome. These might not be her crimes, strictly speaking, but if this world was her world now, she had to own all of it. Even the parts she hated. Maybe especially those parts—make decisions that the other Buffy hadn't been able to make, as close to it as she had been.

"I'm sorry, Angel," she said. "For everything I...did or didn't do."

"Thanks," he said shortly. "That means a lot."

It would be so easy to end the conversation there, and god knows she wanted to. Whatever there was left to say wouldn't make anything better. But she couldn't leave it there, either. She remembered the betrayal she'd felt when she'd discovered Riley's extra-curriculars all too well, how hurt had become anger, and anger had become action. And while she would like to think Angel wouldn't lash out the way she had, this world had taught her to take nothing for granted. "I need you to know," she continued, "that if you go after Spike, I'm going to stop you."

That did it. He whirled around again, his eyes still flashing. "You think I'm going to go after Spike?"

"He has a chip, which makes it easy for you to hit him without him hitting back."

"That's what he told you? That I beat him up for fun?"

"I think you beat him up for the same reason you have a gun."

"You're going to stand there and judge me when you're the one who's been fucking a vampire behind my back?"

Buffy snapped her mouth shut, shame and indignation vying for attention at equal measure. "Are you going to tell me that whatever went wrong here is entirely on me? That you didn't resent me, resent that you weren't a vampire anymore, that you didn't have that strength and purpose? Because I remember you telling me exactly that just a few nights ago. You tried to make your life here all about me and I *can't* do the same, Angel. My world has to be bigger than who I'm with. And when it was safe for us to be together and you weren't part of the reason I cried myself to sleep every night, you got bored."

"That is *not* true."

"Then tell me. I've heard Spike's side of things so give me yours."

"Real reliable source you have there." He rolled his eyes, clenching his fists and turning away for the second time. And for another beat, he said nothing at all, just stood rigid with his back to her, shaking and filling the air with more of those deep, necessary breaths that sounded so strange coming from him. Then he sighed, and it was like watching a balloon deflate. "I went to Los Angeles."

"What?"

"That's where I was when you were here the other day. What I wanted to tell you. Cordelia had sent an RSVP to her wedding." Then he was facing her again, his face that inscrutable mask once more. "Apparently, shortly after I left, Wesley showed up in LA. He and Cordy and Doyle decided to keep the agency going. Doyle kept getting visions even if I wasn't there anymore, and they... They've done well. Got some help from a local gang of hunters who know LA inside and out, made all kinds of connections that... Well, like I said, they've done well. The reason I went to LA was to see if they have had any more dealings with Wolfram and Hart."

Buffy's spine went ramrod straight. Her head was still spinning at the abrupt about-face, but she couldn't deny that she was relieved to be talking about something else. She had no more truth to give him. "Wolfram and Hart," she said. "The law firm that helped Dad."

"Yeah. We crossed paths almost immediately when I set up shop, and not in a way that got me on their Christmas card list. But after us, after the Mohra demon made me human, a gang of demons came into the city looking to commit mass genocide on any creature with human blood. Wolfram and Hart, who represents a number of demons that would be considered impure by ideologues—no matter how powerful or dangerous they are—managed to stop a holocaust."

"Angel, if you're going somewhere with this, I'm not following."

"It wasn't for the right reasons—I firmly believe Wolfram and Hart is worse than these demons and has the resources to do longer-lasting damage and on a larger scale, but their intervention saved a lot of lives. One of the few times they were on our side. And, I learned, that was largely because of one particular lawyer there. Lindsey." He worked his throat. "I went to see if Cordelia and the others have any kind of

contact with him, if they thought they might be able to talk to him about alternative arrangements. If there was something he could do to help in the event you couldn't find the paw. Apparently, they are in touch and he's helped them on a number of smaller matters over the past couple of years."

Her chest lurched. "Dawn?"

Angel slid his hands into his pockets. "I can't say that I would recommend doing business with them, but Dawn is gone because of me, so after you left the other night... Well, I just got to thinking about things I *could* do, even as a human, and this was where I landed. Long story short, Lindsey is coming back to meet with you to open negotiations."

Buffy didn't remember that. "What?"

"He met with you before. Or the Buffy who... You probably haven't met him where you're from, but he has met you. And he doesn't know you have the paw, obviously, because I didn't until tonight. But you'll have that in your pocket when he arrives." He looked at her. "That's it. That's what I wanted to tell you. Thought it would make you happy. That *I* would. Something I haven't done in a long time. But I suppose the joke's on me. I didn't know I had competition."

The return of his vitriol wasn't unexpected but still managed to land a punch. "I didn't tell you this to hurt you."

"I know you didn't. Just turns out you got that much for free."

Buffy pressed her lips together, fighting to maintain her composure. "I never thought I could be the kind of person who would cheat on my husband. Ever. I spent so much time here trying to understand how it happened, and as much as I hate it, I do get it now."

"Did you tell me *that* to hurt me?"

"No. I know I'm in the wrong here, but I also... It wasn't just me, Angel. We've both been trapped in this marriage. We've both wanted out. We both felt like we couldn't get out. You don't love me. Not like a husband should love his wife. And you haven't for a while."

She waited for him to deny it. He wanted to, she could see, though not for any meaningful reason. She didn't know how she knew that but she did. If he admitted he didn't love her, then he admitted he hadn't really lost anything that hadn't already been lost. The time they had

sunk into their marriage, the destiny he thought he was owed—that was already gone. All that was left was the debris.

"I did once," he said softly. "I really did, Buffy."

She offered a smile, though her lips had trouble maintaining it. "Me too."

"So...what happens now?"

"I'm going. I only came here to...tell you all this. I promised myself I would if I found out I'm stuck here. Because whatever you and I were doing before, I can't keep doing that."

And there it was. All out now. All secrets revealed, everything on the table, the last hurdle crossed. Buffy held her breath and waited, forcing herself to not look away. To watch as the finality of what she'd said settled and became real rather than just another platitude in a marriage that seemed to be full of them. And as she watched, she wondered if maybe she hadn't given herself enough credit where reading Angel was concerned, or maybe saying goodbye to him had been the missing link all along. For a few seconds, he looked undecided, torn between anger and resignation, the desire to keep fighting, keep screaming, keep pushing, perhaps because the fight was all they had left. But then those seconds were over, and so were they. Over as they never had been before. She saw him accept it, experienced a sharp lance of pain for the person she'd been once, and let go. In that moment, they both did. And they both knew it.

"Neither can I." Angel stared at her, his lips twitching, almost like he wanted to smile but couldn't quite manage. "Are you going to him?"

It was a question she should have expected but hadn't. Perhaps because he made it sound easy—like she could do just that. Return to the crypt and the broken man she'd left inside. She wanted to. Now that everything was out there, all the lies turned truths, the only place she wanted to be was with Spike. But the fact remained that she had cost him everything, and no matter if he loved her, she might not be welcome. And if that were the case, she would have to find a way to be okay with it.

"Yeah," Buffy said. "I am."

"Then I'll know where to find you when Lindsey arrives."

She nodded, held Angel's gaze a moment longer, then turned and

walked back out the door. A little beaten, but lighter and freer than she had been at any time since bursting through the soil and dragging in gulps of air. That part of her life was officially behind her—no more cracked doors, no more looking back. And as terrifying as that was, it was also exhilarating.

No matter what came next, she would keep moving forward.

21

AND HOME, FOR ME WAS ALWAYS SOMEONE ELSE YOU GO

She should wait a day. She knew she should. But after a patrol that did little to exorcise her nerves, Buffy found herself back outside of Spike's crypt, staring at the door and wondering how the hell to have this conversation. There was every chance he wouldn't hear her—or worse, hear her and be furious with what she said. No matter that she was Buffy and he loved her, as he'd told her more than once, there was no reason to think the things he'd learned tonight wouldn't impact where they stood.

Not when she'd cost him everything.

And even if he didn't hate her, that didn't necessarily mean what she'd want it to mean. It didn't mean he'd love her, really love *her*. She wasn't sure he could. Even less sure that he would ever see her as anything but a replacement for what he'd lost, though completely certain she couldn't survive that any easier.

At the same time, though, if he didn't throw her out, if he told her he loved her too, she didn't know she had it in her to say no.

Buffy inhaled deeply, braced herself, and pushed the door open.

"Spike?"

No response, though she knew he was there. The tingles along the

back of her neck never lied. Then the door swung shut with a loud clank, and the silence from the graveyard followed her inside.

She didn't have to venture too far to find him. Spike was strewn across one of the couches, sunk low with his legs spread, his arm dangling over the side, a bottle held loosely between his fingers. He met her gaze with eyes that seemed to stare through her, the raw pain from before brimming so close to the surface just looking at him hurt.

"'Lo, Slayer," he said in a low rumble. There was a slight wobble to his voice, but that much she'd expected. "Wasn't sure you'd be back tonight."

"I can leave if you want."

He shook his head without lifting it. "No need. Place is yours as much as it is mine."

"You're drunk."

At that, he huffed and raised the bottle to eye-level as though to scope out the contents. "Not nearly as much as I'd like to be, sorry to say. Drank up most of what I had the night I learned about all this. This here is all that's left. Thought about going to nick some more after you lit out. Knew there wouldn't be enough."

"Why didn't you?"

He blinked, glanced away. "Movin' hurts," he said. Then straightened at last, took a swig of whatever was left in the bottle, then set it on the stone floor beside him. "That and if you popped in, I didn't want you to find the place empty."

Her heart skipped. "No?"

"Not seein' me at my best, I'll admit, but I didn't forget what I told you earlier." Spike sighed and leaned forward, resting his knees on his elbows. "Always a place here for you, love."

Buffy drew in a sharp breath, a bit embarrassed by the prickling sensation behind her eyes. But at the same time not because she hadn't been sure that would be the case—that he would still feel that way now that it wasn't a hypothetical anymore, rather a reality. And it made her love him so much she felt she could burst with it.

"I told Angel," she said in a rush. "When I left here, I went home and told Angel everything."

He swung his head up. "What?"

"I-I told you I would. If I'm stuck here. I can't be in that marriage."

He stared at her for a moment, then huffed. "Bloody hell, wasn't expectin' that."

"I told you—"

"I know what you told me. Also know it wasn't too long ago you were sittin' here tellin' me the wanker was the love of your life." Spike arched an eyebrow as though to dare her to contradict him, but there was no point. She remembered every conversation they'd had since she'd gotten here with almost painful accuracy.

"And you also know," she said instead, "that my feelings have changed over the past couple of days. Like, a lot."

"Difference between thinkin' you might have a yen for yours truly and cuttin' loose the only bloke you thought you'd ever love, pet. Wagered you'd try to fix things with him if it turned out you were well and bloody marooned."

"Well, that's not what I did," Buffy replied. "I told him all of it. The monkey's paw stuff, that I'm not the Buffy he married." She paused, considered. "I told him about the affair, too."

Again, he looked at her sharply, but his eyes weren't soft now. "You *what*?"

"I told him that the Buffy he married was in love with you."

"Bloody hell, Slayer. Easier ways to get a fella staked."

"He's not going to stake you."

A high-pitched titter rattled off his lips. "Ah, that makes me feel loads better. Git finds out his honey's been runnin' around with a creature of the night that he just happens to bloody loathe—one that can't hit back, mind you—but not to worry, he won't do anythin' about it."

"I told him I'd stop him."

"Right. Real comfort that is. Can't be here all the time, can you?"

"Why?"

Spike narrowed his eyes at her. "Well," he said, drawing the word out like what he was about to say was perfectly obvious, "if it's over between the two of you, reckon he'll be movin' out, yeah? Unless you mean him to get the bloody house. Won't need to hide here anymore."

"There are a lot of places to hide, Spike. I come here because I want to be here."

"Right," he said, nodding. "Told me as much. Same as it was where you're from, yeah? Whisper in a dead man's ear and all that."

"No, not all that. Maybe that's how it started, but..." Buffy looked down, sucking on the inside of her cheek, reaching for the words, meager as they were, that had danced across her mind on the way here. In particular, the thing that terrified her. The thing she wasn't sure was something he'd want or welcome. "I am so sorry for all of this," she said at length. "I know you're in pain and I hate that I did that to you. I hate that I'm the reason."

Spike shifted, and she saw he would wave her off. Like he'd waved off what had happened downstairs. Give her an out, an excuse, try to believe—or at the very least, get her to believe—that what she'd done hadn't been all that bad. He saw her as no one else did, even when she was at her lowest. Even when he had no reason to see her at all. Here she'd ripped away the world from him and somehow he wasn't angry with her anymore. Not like he'd been that first night when he'd sent a plate full of food careening into the nearest pillar. That rage was gone and she didn't know how he did it.

"I have something to tell you," she said before he could begin to argue, and now her pulse started to well and truly thunder. "I'm not sure if you're going to want to hear it."

"Better and better," he muttered. "Maybe I should've gone out for sauce after all."

"I want you to know that I don't expect anything. I would never expect anything. Not after what I did."

"Slayer, you can come down off the cross anytime you fancy."

She entertained a much-appreciated rush of annoyance that was unfortunately chased by fondness almost immediately, though it made little sense to her. But that was Spike—he was grating and dismissive at times, but he was himself. Always. "I mean *here*," she said. "To you. Downstairs."

Spike groaned and rolled his head back. "I've bloody told you—"

"I know what you told me. I heard that. I also heard what you said that day as you were throwing me out. That I'm not her and she can't be replaced. That it's not that easy for you. Believe me, I heard all of that." This time when he looked at her, she couldn't hold his gaze,

instead crossed her arms and fixed her eyes on her feet. "What you had with your Buffy is something I...I've wanted for a long time. Something I thought I had once, but I now know I didn't. I still want it. I'll want it forever. And I know I can't be her. I know I'm *not*. We might be the same but we're also not the same. She made decisions I never got a chance to make. Had this whole life I can still only barely imagine. But there are parts of us that *are* the same. Big, big parts. I share her DNA and sacred calling. And like her, I am...completely in love with you."

She waited. For a breath, a sigh, a word, her name—for any of it. What she got was silence.

"I realized it last night," she continued, her voice rougher, her gaze still pinned to the stone floor. "When you told me you cared about the girl I saved because I cared. It just hit me. Not the feeling but knowing what that feeling was. Calling it by its name. I don't know when it started. Maybe when you let Glory tear you apart last spring. Maybe when I came back. It's just...been there. A part of me, and I didn't know that was what it was. I think I was *afraid* that's what it was—why I was so bummed when I went to see Angel in my world and I couldn't feel for him the way I once did. Because Angel... Despite everything, despite nearly ending the world, loving Angel was safe. I knew how to do that and I also knew that we couldn't be together. But I didn't know how to love you, how that could be okay with everything I thought or had been told. Last night is when I realized that *how* was already there. I love you. That's how."

Another silence, this one longer and damn near unbearable. Buffy listened to the thumps her heart made, her skin both tingling and damp with sweat as though she had dived off a cliff. Which she felt like she had. Never in all his life had Spike been quiet this long, she was sure of it, and that couldn't mean anything good.

But dammit, she'd come this far. She just had to push ahead. Get it all out.

"It's okay if you can't love me like that," she said. "I know you do—love me, that is. You say you do and I've learned the hard way you don't say things you don't mean. But it can't be what it was with the other me. I don't want to take anyone's place or...be with you because she was. I want it to be because it's you and me. I-if it happens at all."

There. At last, she thought she heard something. A breath, the trembly sort he let out sometimes when he was thinking hard, looking at her or—more accurately—seeing things she would rather not show to anyone, least of all him. But dammit, that was all he gave her. A single breath. Nothing else. And now the prospect of looking up was something beyond terrifying, and she had the thought that perhaps this feeling was the reason she had walled herself away after Angel had broken her heart. With all her strength, she'd forgotten how easy it was to feel vulnerable. Knowing that a word or a look or a sigh had the ability to shatter her, and that closing herself off was the only way to make sure the most tender part of her never felt that pain again.

Buffy stepped back without meaning to, but realized once she had that it was the right thing to do. She'd been stupid to come here. "I'll go," she said. Then, maybe because she was a glutton for punishment, she added, "I just wanted you to know that...you don't live in a world where Buffy doesn't love you. If that means anything."

He must have moved when she turned, done that preternatural vampire thing where she didn't hear it or see it until he was in front of her. Buffy jumped when their eyes clashed, her heart in her throat—and on her sleeve, she was sure, as it hadn't been since she'd been a teenager. And he was there, breathing hard and seeing far more than she wanted him to, even with everything she'd said. Seeing all of her and still betraying none of himself, which was so unfair she wanted to cry again but didn't dare. He looked seconds from either taking a swing at her or swallowing her in a kiss, like he could scream or laugh or snarl or sob, and all of it would make equal sense.

The only thing she wasn't expecting was what he gave her.

"Stay."

Buffy blinked against the rising pressure in her sinuses. "Stay?"

He nodded, exhaled again, and brushed a few strands of hair out of her eyes. "Your place as much as mine. Told you that."

"Spike—"

"And you bloody owe me, Slayer."

"I owe you."

"Told your wanker husband that you'd stop him from putting a stake in me. Hard to do if you scarper now." He held her gaze, and at

last something soft entered his. Something like the look he'd given her what felt like a thousand years ago when he'd realized she was alive and on the staircase. "Just don't leave, all right?" he said, his voice also soft now. "Stay with me."

She forced her throat to work, forced her heart back where it belonged. "Okay."

Spike relaxed—all of him did. The tension in his shoulders slacked, another breath rushed through his lips, and he smiled at her.

"Bloody right. Was prepared to run after you if you took off. Toss you over my shoulder. Whole caveman bit."

"You would've run after me?"

"What? Don't tell me you're surprised."

Buffy pressed her lips together. "I'm not sure what I am, Spike," she said, not really meaning to but also not able to stop herself. Her insides were still dancing with residual nerves and relief that wasn't quite relief, seeing as she didn't know whether or not she could trust it. What it meant, his asking her to stay, and what it meant that she'd said she would.

"You're Buffy," he said as if it were the simplest, most obvious thing in the world, and kissed her.

IT HADN'T BEEN that kind of kiss, the sort that was lips, teeth, and tongue tangling and tasting and nipping and scraping as clothes went flying in all directions. The kiss had been soft, sweet, and brief. A whisper of his lips against hers, enough to leave his flavor in her mouth, to make sure her head kept spinning well after he'd pulled away. Spike hadn't said anything of note, either. He'd invited her to join him on the couch to catch a flick, loaded her up with some of her favorite snacks, and when she'd started to lose the battle to keep her eyes open, he'd been there to lean on, his shoulder surprisingly comfortable, much like the rest of him. He hadn't put an arm around her nor had he shoved her off. Just let her close her eyes and fade away to dreamland.

Only there hadn't been any dreams. Just a deep span of black in between periods of semi-consciousness—a sound from the television

piercing through the curtain to bring her surroundings back into sharp relief. Spike shifting, making her shift with him, or even releasing one of those deep sighs, the sort that told her his mind was hard at work even if he himself wasn't moving. Eventually, he did move enough that Buffy stirred most of the way back to consciousness, and then the crypt was quiet and the light that had flickered across her closed eyelids blinked out.

She didn't need to be told what was happening. At some point over the past couple of days, this had become the norm. Move downstairs when the hour grew late enough, strip out of whatever she was wearing, and slide into one of the nighttime sets of clothes she stashed at the crypt. Tonight she chose a tank and panties, which might be more risqué than normal but it was what was comfortable and she didn't have it in her to worry about mixed signals. Particularly when her signals weren't mixed anymore.

Everything else remained the same, though. Once she was in nighttime attire, she would walk around the bed to the side that was hers, and Spike would do the same. Get himself settled on the edge of the mattress, even knowing that the space would do little good—he'd wake up curled around her, believing, if only for a few seconds, she was a version of Buffy that would never come home again.

Buffy was just awake enough for the thought to hurt. And she wondered if this wouldn't be her last sleepover after all. If he went back to the way things had been before she'd poured her heart out, pretended like it hadn't happened, she didn't think she could stay. No sense torturing herself.

But this time, Spike didn't keep to the edge of the bed. Instead, as she settled on her side and prepared to sleep for real, she felt the mattress dip with his movements, and then he was there, right behind her, slipping an arm over her waist, burying his nose in her hair.

Her stomach plummeted and at once, all of her was awake. "Spike..."

"This all right?" he asked, tugging her closer, her back flush against his chest, their legs suddenly tangled. The sensation of skin-on-skin, of his leg hair against her calves, made her realize he'd forgone the jeans tonight. Which meant there was nothing preventing his cock from

sliding along the curve of her ass, and she didn't know how she felt about that when nothing had as of yet been defined. If she was taking advantage of him or if he were taking advantage of her, or if any of it mattered anymore.

Except it did matter. It had to.

"Spike, I don't think we should... You've been drinking."

He gave a little huff. "Hardly enough. Buzz faded hours ago."

"But—"

"Just wanna hold you, pet. Can I?"

It took a couple of seconds, but she managed to relax. Breathe out nice and slow, releasing whatever inside of her had been wound so tight. "You know which Buffy I am?"

He pressed his lips against the back of her neck. "I know which. The one who loves me."

She didn't respond to that. After all, he was right.

The sleep she fell into was surprisingly deep, all things considered, and it came on rather quickly. Even with him there at her back, his arm around her middle, her mind filled with all sorts of jumbled thoughts. Wondering what would happen when, inevitably, Spike awoke her by peppering kisses along her neck and grinding himself against her ass. If the next time her eyes opened, she'd be with a version of the vampire who wanted her. And not sure what she wanted to find herself.

But when the moment came and consciousness started to chase away sleep, it was without a morning kiss. The arms that had been around her as she'd drifted off were gone, as was the pressure at her back. The knowledge was enough to shove her from drowsy to fully awake. Buffy sat up quickly, twisting as she moved, half-expecting to find the bed beside her empty. But it wasn't. Spike was there, watching her with that ever-unreadable expression, the stretch of mattress between them.

Buffy swallowed. "Well, this is new," she said, painfully aware of her voice. Of every bit of herself, stripped and beneath the sheet. "You're usually a morning cuddler."

"Usually. Haven't slept a wink." His lips twitched like he wanted to smile but couldn't quite convince his mouth to do it. "Lot to think about, yeah?"

"Yeah." Great. Now her heart was pounding again, and of course, he'd know it, hear it, be super aware of her as always. "Like what?"

Spike looked away, then back again. "Been runnin' through it. Everythin' you told me and more than that."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

Buffy waited for him to elaborate. When he didn't, she forced herself to speak around the rock in her throat. "Any luck?"

He hesitated a beat as though trying to find words, his brow furrowed. "Keep comin' back to what happened when I walked into that room and smelled your blood."

"What room was this?"

"Back in Vegas, when I got in. You were sittin' there lookin' like you'd been bloody trampled. And I smelled your blood." Spike breathed out slowly, held her gaze for a long moment—long enough that she started to feel dumb for not seeing what he saw. "Knew it wasn't serious," he went on, "but for a second I thought you mighta gotten it into your head that this world was better without you after all and you gave it another try. Offin' yourself. Didn't last longer than it took to see your knees were all scuffed but I dunno if I've ever been so scared in all my life."

"Oh." Whatever else, she hadn't expected that. He hadn't said anything about it that night at all. Hadn't said much of anything, come to think of it—but then, neither had she, her head swimming with the revelation that she was in love with him and what that meant for her. For them, or the promise of them. "I'm sorry I scared you."

This time he managed to pull off an actual grin. "I scared myself."

God, he made absolutely no sense whatsoever. "What?"

"The other thing I thought—you looked downright edible." Again he met her gaze, and again, he looked away quickly as though he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't. "Was easier at the first, you bein' hung up on Angel. Here 'cause you had nowhere else. Knowin' that I wasn't what you wanted. Could fool myself into thinkin' there really were two of you. That you were someone other than Buffy."

"I haven't felt much like Buffy."

"From what you tell me, that's not exactly new, is it?"

No, it wasn't. She hadn't felt anything like herself since being pulled from Heaven. The other night, in the alley, was the closest she'd come, and just getting there had been a fight.

"You started lookin' at me different," Spike continued after a moment. "Started lookin' at me the way you did before all this paw business buggered things up. Like you might feel...that you might love me. Mucked with my head. Had me forgettin' this isn't your world, that you weren't *mine*, and that mattered. After what we had, not havin' you like that would bloody break me. If the choice was some or not at all, you know?"

Almost at once, Buffy thought about how he'd barked at her after she'd made a comment about being in a relationship with him. How that had seemed to have come out of nowhere, how it had cut her to the quick, and how he'd been subdued afterward. Not acknowledging the moment but also not lingering there. And she also remembered the way he'd looked at her when he'd come back, how he'd just stopped talking, how he'd studied her before springing into action.

"You thought I was still into Angel," she said.

"He's the reason you're here, yeah?"

"That's what I thought."

It had been, but she knew better now. And she'd told him as much.

"Same story, second verse," Spike replied, and he smiled again, though at what she didn't know. "Just happened faster this time, is all. Knew you felt somethin' for me. Didn't know what it was or how it measured up. And I can't do anything halfway with you. Not when I know what havin' all of you feels like."

Buffy nodded, barely aware of the movement. "I don't want halfway, either. That's why I told Angel everything. I had to. He couldn't be there as a backup. No matter what happened with us."

He pressed his eyes closed, released another long breath. "It's never gonna not smart, losin' what we had," he said, his voice hoarse. "Wasn't all wine and roses but we got it close as we could, things bein' the way they are. I'll treasure every second until I'm dust." He paused. "But fuck, I am so bloody thankful that's not the end, too. Losin' it is hard. Nothin' compared to what losin' you, really losing you, was or would be again."

"W-would be?"

"Yeah. 'Cause you're still here. Right here." Spike looked up, held her gaze, the blue in his eyes practically on fire. "Had it wrong. All of it. There is no *you* and *her*. There's just *you*. It's all you, Buffy. Wherever you are, whatever you remember of us, that doesn't change who you are, and who you are is the woman I love."

She didn't realize she was crying until he reached out, caught one of her tears, then swiped his thumb across her trembling lips.

"Way I see it now," he said, "I reckon I might be the luckiest man on the sodding planet. Not many blokes know what it feels like, have the woman they're mad for fall in love with them all over again. Somehow, I do."

His lips were on hers before she could summon a breath, much less a response, and everything else fell away. This world and its bad and its good, the terrible decisions she'd made and their consequences. The uncertainty of what came next coupled with the knowledge of what she'd lost—none of it mattered, because Spike was kissing her, and it was the exact opposite of last night. Not chaste or brief, but hot and just short of desperate, his lips and tongue in constant motion, nipping, tugging, seeking, and pulling her into him. And into him she went, fighting the urge to laugh with relief, with something light and pure and so bright she thought she might burst with it.

She didn't know how he did it—how he always seemed to be able to read her, understand her, better than anyone else. How he could find the words she needed when she'd been certain they didn't exist. When it had seemed impossible, just seconds ago, that she would ever view herself as anything other than a spare of what he already had. And yeah, that kind of worry wasn't the sort of thing that could vanish entirely with one convincing argument, but the doubts that lingered were whispers of themselves, distant and inconsequential.

"Fuck, baby," Spike muttered, and there was so much want in his voice she thought she could cry.

The next thing she knew, the mattress was at her back and he was above her, again wrestling kisses off her lips, chasing her tongue with his, and now bunching up the tank top she'd worn to bed. The slide of fabric against her skin alone was enough to set her on fire, but then his

fingers followed, feather-light strokes along her ribcage and circling her bellybutton before finally settling over her breasts. And rather than pull her top off the rest of the way, he fisted the material and yanked so it ripped straight down the middle.

"That cost money, you know," Buffy said against his lips.

"Woulda taken too long to do it proper," Spike replied, then kissed her again before breaking his mouth from hers to explore her cheeks, her chin, her throat with his lips. When he nipped at the pulse point he found, she jerked in surprise, bringing her cotton-clad pussy in contact with where he was bare and hard, and she shuddered again in blissful anticipation.

He chuckled, the vibrations a pleasant tickle. "Ooh, this'll be fun," he said. "Dunno what you like, do you, pet?"

"Huh?"

"Get to show you all over again." Spike pulled back and held her gaze as the bones in his face shifted, amber overpowering the blue, and lowered his head again before she could think to ask. Then he was skimming his fangs along the column of her neck, rumbling another deep laugh when she gasped and rolled her hips against him. At once, her body was alight with dueling, contradictory sensations—her slayer instincts blaring their warnings and the rest of her burning with something else entirely, and she felt the pull everywhere. Every time he ran his fang along her throat, she felt a corresponding tug deep within herself, the sort that seemed connected to her clit, leaving her panties soaked and awakening a craving that had always been there, just never acknowledged.

Spike pulled back with a slight snarl and took her mouth again, fangs and all, so that it was a delicate dance between frantic, desperate kisses and slow caution. But he was no stranger to this, angling in such a way that he only teased her with the danger of nicking herself. And that was intoxicating, knowing how close she could come, how close she was, wondering how he would react if she pressed too hard and spilled blood into his mouth, and *then* wondering if he could read her thoughts, as his kisses became harder, bolder, like he was daring her or something and she wanted to give in—would—if flirting with it wasn't so much fun.

When he finally broke his mouth from hers, he was panting, his eyes somehow bright and dark at the same time.

"Bloody hell," he said in a low rumble, "I've missed you so much."

The air seemed to punch out of her lungs. "But I'm not—"

"Yeah, love, you are." He kissed her again before she could ask questions or argue, then started nibbling a path down her neck, this time with intent. "Know how I can tell?" He dragged his mouth over the slope of her breast, over the bite mark he'd left there days ago after pulling her into that closet at the Bronze. "'Cause your heart starts thuddin' when I do this." Spike skated his fang along her nipple, holding her gaze as he did. "And you go bloody wild when I do this." He closed his mouth around the fang mark and gave it a hard suck, and Buffy lost control of her body. She threw her head back, a long, tortured sob tearing through her throat, and clutched at his head as he swirled his tongue over the wound, chuckling all the while into her skin and damn near making her fall apart with that and that alone.

"That's my girl," Spike whispered above the bite, nudging the spot with his nose.

"Oh *god*." Her chest ached with the breaths she dragged in. "What the hell?"

"Know you had at least one wanker's fangs in your throat before me," he said. He curled his tongue around her nipple then began dropping kisses down her breast, across her abdomen and lower still, resituating so he was between her legs. "Not my fault no one who shared your bed before me knew how much you fancy havin' those played with."

"Is this..." She gulped in air, tried again. "Is it normal?"

"Normal for us," Spike replied, winking at her as he positioned one of her legs over his shoulder, and damn, the sight of him there, his mouth so close to where she was hot and wet and throbbing for him, had her trembling all over again. "For you and me, and that's all I bloody care about." He dropped his gaze, ran a finger along the crotch of her panties, pressing in just enough to tease her through the damp fabric. "Mmm...still cross with me about the top?"

"Huh?"

"Just tryin' to suss out if you'll throw a stake my way for ruinin' another pair of your knickers."

Buffy laughed, and the sound startled her so much she had no choice but to laugh again. "Is this a recurring thing? You destroying my clothes?"

"As often as possible." He grinned and blew her a kiss, then hooked one of his fangs under the material near her left thigh and slid down. And though she knew it was coming, she gasped anyway, the sound of ripping cotton surprisingly loud against the otherwise still crypt air.

"There now," he said, flipping over the flap of ruined underwear as he might flip open a book. "Isn't that better?"

He didn't give her time to reply before his hands were on her, fingers slipping between her folds and into the juice he found there. The sensation of his skin against her, cold where she was burning, came as another shock to the system, but in the best way. "Always so wet for me," Spike murmured, spreading her open as his fangs receded and his human face chased away the demon. "Soft and pink and bloody soaked. Been close to torture. Having you so close, knowin' what you wanted, every time you got hot for me—"

"Oh god." Buffy covered her face, which flamed under her fingers. "Do you really have to tell me that?"

She felt another rumble that told her he was laughing at her, the jerk. "Thought you might like to know, is all," he said before licking a long line up her slit. "Wasn't just you hurtin' for it these last few days. Always want you, pet. Want your taste in my mouth. Wanna hear the sounds you make, feel how good you grip me." He broke off with a groan of his own, doing things with his tongue that had her indignation fading on a whimper and her embarrassment more than a little fleeting. He lapped and licked, nibbled and sucked, all the while uttering little yummy noises that rendered her a writhing mess, sensation compounding quickly, the heat skating across her skin also lit up from the inside.

"You taste like mine, Buffy," he said, then licked a path across her labia. "All mine."

As long as he kept doing that, she would be whatever he wanted her to be. And lucky her, he seemed more than content to stay where

he was, alternating between soft, playful flicks and long, indulgent strokes of his tongue, all of it together making that delicious pressure swell and build until she was on the cusp. Only the cusp was as far as he took her—took her there and left her stranded. It didn't occur to her until the third time he pushed her to the edge that he was doing it on purpose—working her up without the peak, ignoring the place where she needed him most.

"Spike." She didn't know what to say so she lifted her hips and nudged at his mouth. "Please."

He responded by blowing on her clit—the sudden attention sharp, almost painful, but also not nearly enough—and she sobbed her frustration as he laughed at her.

"Havin' trouble, love?"

Before she could summon a response, his tongue was in play once more, drawing a slow circle around her clit and coming so close to actual contact she could cry. More of those sparks flared to life—hot and wild and too far apart to truly detonate. And he laughed again at her answering whimper because he was a bad man and that was what bad men did.

"Poor Slayer," he said, dodging away from her hand when she tried to fist his hair. "Something the matter?"

"You're not nice."

"Sweetest thing you've ever said to me." He thanked her with another one of those circles, slower this time.

God, this was the way he was going to kill her. She just knew it. "Unh, Spike..."

"Baby need somethin'?" he drawled, then dipped his tongue inside of her before she could respond. "Could always ask, you know."

She was breathing so hard now her lungs ached from the effort, small trembles having seized her from every angle. She gave him a whimper, one that sounded wanton and strange to her ears, and fisted his hair once more, trying to muscle his mouth where she wanted it. And like the last time, he pulled free, laughing, then thrust his tongue back into her pussy. He dipped once, twice before pulling back to let his fingers take over. And that was good—she remembered how he'd filled her in that closet, how he pumped and twisted and rubbed spots

inside of her no one else had bothered to find. But it wasn't what she wanted and the bastard knew it.

"Spike," she heard herself say, and though she was whispering, it seemed almost intrusively loud against the wet sounds he was making. "Please, I need your mouth."

"I'll just bet you do." He grinned up at her, his lips and chin shining in the weak light, before he dipped his head again. This time he gave it to her, sliding his tongue over her clit slowly and with such care, it was nearly too intense for as badly as she wanted it. Buffy drew in another hard breath, shuddered again, another indecent sound that she hadn't been sure she could make tearing through her throat.

"Could drink you for days," Spike murmured around her flesh. "The way you move. Bloody hell, the way you taste..." He dragged his tongue around and over her clit, keeping time with the thrusts of his hand, working up to a pace that was just shy of too much, then coming down again. It seemed like a game to him—hell, it probably was. See how quickly he could push her to the edge and how many times he could walk her back. And when she closed her thighs around his face, he just rumbled his approval and rewarded her with a hard, direct suck, one that nearly startled her into orgasm but didn't because he pulled back almost at once.

"Spike, *please*."

If he responded at all, she didn't hear it—he didn't try to lift his head, just kept his mouth moving. Kept spearing his fingers inside of her, twisting his wrist to press against her flesh, and by the time he showed mercy, she was on the edge dividing pleasure and pain, wondering if he truly intended to keep her there. But hers was a considerate monster, even if he was a monster, and god, did he know her body. When he gave her clit a final lick before fastening his mouth over it, he shot her into a stratosphere well beyond physical ecstasy. Her orgasm both crashed over her and consumed her from the inside, all of her pulled in a thousand directions, but a good pull. The best pull. A pull that came with fire and explosions, but still managed to soothe the burn on the way down.

It took Buffy a few seconds—or minutes, or maybe hours—to return to herself. Her skin was damp, her throat and chest a bit sore

from all the screaming she hadn't realized she'd done until Spike laughed and muttered something about his sensitive hearing. At some point, her legs had gone slack around his face and now he was prowling up her body again, dropping playful bites across her belly, kissing along the undersides of her breasts, pausing to swirl his tongue around her nipples—again just enough to almost be too much, and again just to show her he knew where that line was and how to treat it.

"God, I love you," Spike murmured, smoothing away the sweaty hair from her cheeks and forehead. "Look at me. Keep looking at me."

Buffy didn't realize her eyes were closed until he said it, and when she opened them, she found herself instantly adrift in his. He kept his gaze on her as he lowered his head and brushed a kiss across her lips, as he reached between them to tease the head of his cock along her slit before he began pushing inside. Another small, involuntary cry broke free from her, one that seemed to echo through him too, for he fed her back a moan and took her mouth again. And then they were rocking together, Spike pulling and Buffy pursuing, wrapping one of her legs around his waist to help leverage his thrusts, which started off slow and sweet but quickly became hurried and hot. Like he was fighting a losing battle with control.

"So hot, so tight, you feel so good." He raised himself on his elbows, pressed his brow to hers, muttering little praises that almost seemed knocked out of him rather than consciously given. "My Slayer, my Buffy, missed you, missed you, love you, love you, love you, so good, squeeze me like that, such a tight puss, fuck yes."

She liked to think she would have said something in response, but her brain had blipped out, all of her focused on the sensation of his cock pumping into her, on the way he felt—so hard and thick and part of her. Truly part of her. Of him above her, his eyes fixed on hers, how the blue seemed to grow darker the more she watched. How they sounded together every time his flesh smacked hers, his hard to her soft, and the way he breathed upon contact. Then the bits of her she had forgotten about, as long as it had been since she'd really been present. The encounter at the Bronze had happened in such a blur, she remembered the place she'd hit after he'd bitten her—that pure white

blast of awesome—but everything leading up to that had been rushed and confused, no matter how good it had felt.

Buffy was present now—present and starving for more. Spike growled when she tugged his head back down to steal a kiss, doing some sort of swirly motion with his hips. And this she remembered, too. How Spike's lips moved over hers in tender strokes that completely offset his hard thrusts. How he plunged and stroked and tasted, and plundered and pounded and bruised at the same time.

Then he broke his mouth from hers and began talking again, telling her how good she felt, how warm she was, how much he loved it when she squeezed him just like that, how her pussy was home—how *she* was home—and he'd never let her doubt it again. How it drove him wild knowing how much she wanted him, how he could feel it in her touch, in the way she kissed him, in how she tightened that bloody exquisite cunt of hers so nicely around his cock, how her sighs and whimpers made him hard, how *she* made him hard, always had, and she was his now. All his. She had been forever but not like this—in the open, the two of them, and it would be so good. All the things they'd ever talked about, the things he knew she wanted—because she was Buffy and he knew her, knew *her*, no matter where she came from. No matter what she remembered. He'd remember enough for them both.

And when she used her superior strength to flip him onto his back, he told her he loved that too.

"That's it, baby," he said hoarsely, flicking his thumbs over her nipples before lifting himself off the mattress so he could love her breasts with his tongue. "Ride me. Make it hurt."

"I don't wanna hurt," she replied, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Done hurting."

"Yes. Fuck, yes." He pressed his mouth to her shoulder, dropping his hands to her ass to help guide her up and down his cock. "Buffy..."

"I want it. Spike, I want it. Please."

She didn't even know what she was talking about, except she did, for her breath hitched when his fangs descended, when he flashed her a knowing grin before tracing his left hand around her hip, down her thigh, and to her pussy so he could meet her clit with soft, flirty strokes every time she sank onto him. And that was good but it could

get better—she knew it could, and she knew how, and so he did he. The hunger was there in his eyes, hunger and so much more. And when he teased the sweat-soaked skin at her breast—that bite he'd left there before—all of her clenched in anticipation, making him growl, making him roar, and ultimately making him slide his fangs home.

It seemed impossible that anything could eclipse what she'd experienced the first time, how she had burned to the point of bursting, how she'd held on as he bucked and snarled around her skin, the pull of his mouth an exquisite pressure that seemed tied to her clit, tied to sensation itself. This time was like that, only not like it at all, as while she was definitely launched out of orbit, she also felt more grounded, more tethered, more *a part of* the world than she ever had. He was there, clutching her to him as he shuddered, his cock pulsing and then spilling into her. He was there, kissing her brow, her cheeks, her throat, licking the bite he'd opened, and moaning when she clenched anew around him. He was there, whispering into her hair that she was his.

He was there, and so was she. And when she met his eyes again, they were full of such love she thought she could cry. Only there was no need to cry. Just hold and bask and be.

"I love you," she said, realizing she hadn't yet. Not since last night.

Spike grinned and kissed her. "Don't I know it."

She surprised herself by laughing. Then he laughed too, kissed her again, and pushed her back onto the mattress.

"Let's do that some more, shall we?" he murmured against her lips.

"Do what some more?"

"All of it."

As far as plans went, she had definitely heard worse ones.

22

MY INTENTION'S BECOME NOT TO LOSE WHAT I'VE WON

SPIKE REALLY HAD THOUGHT OF EVERYTHING WHEN HE'D HAD THIS shower installed. Water pressure, slip-resistant flooring, and the best alcove to prop her against as he pounded inside of her—the last one being a perk she hadn't gotten to enjoy until right now, and Buffy had to say, it was her favorite. He had his face buried in the crook of her neck and was busy peppering her skin with kisses in between muttering how good she felt and begging her to squeeze him tighter, please. Knowing, as he seemed to know everything else, when she was holding back and what to say to push her just a little more. Couldn't hurt him, he promised, and he wanted to feel all of it. Everything every lousy human lover she'd ever had couldn't stand—give it to him, because she was glorious just as she was, her pussy was heaven, and even if he dusted in the process, he could think of no better way to go.

It would take a while to get used to it—Spike's unerring ability to read her mind and counter her concerns before she could find the words to voice them. She hadn't even realized she had been holding back until he nipped at her breast and begged her to pretty please try to bruise him just a little. Work those muscles—yeah, he knew about those—and fight him with her cunt until he had no option but to surrender.

Then there were the words themselves—the ones that seemed to tumble so freely out of him, his running stream of consciousness, all Spike, completely unfiltered. Some of the things he told her were important, most filthy, and all the sort she would have sworn did nothing for her, once upon a time. None of the men in her past had been particularly verbose in the bedroom. Riley, perhaps, had come the closest, but she thought only because they had developed a routine, had enough time to get used to what the other liked or didn't like, and less hesitant as their relationship grew more solid to ask for it. But it hadn't been anything like this. Lavish praises of how she felt interspersed with confessions of love and pleas to ride him harder. It hadn't been pornographic. It hadn't been Spike.

And she guessed that explained a lot.

"God, you're magnificent," Spike said, bracing one arm around her back to support her as he swirled his hips and pumped harder into her. She didn't know how he did it, except that Spike had all that deceptive strength—strength she knew not to take for granted but managed to, anyway. He held her up and braced his free hand on the wall at her back, then dipped his head to meet her breasts every time she thrust back onto him. "So pretty. So fierce. My Slayer." He gave her breast another playful bite before he was drawn back to her mouth. That was another thing she loved—how he seemed to crave the simpler intimacies the way he craved everything else. How he poured so much of himself into kissing her, how he could be naughty and passionate and biting and sweet all at the same time.

"Fuck, I love watchin' you fuck me," he muttered a moment later, his brow pressed to hers. She followed his gaze and saw he was watching precisely that—his thick, wet cock plunging in and out of her at a rhythm. "Love seeing how hungry you are for it. How wet you get. How much you want me. Want this cock."

Buffy trembled, digging her fingers into his skin. "Oh shit."

"Love the way you look when I fuck you." Spike watched them move together a few seconds longer, then groaned and lifted his head again so that his gaze was fixed on hers. "Love how flushed you get. How your eyes bloody burn for me. The way your heart thumps. Like you're livin' just for this, for me."

"Spike—"

"Tell me whose girl you are, love. Wanna hear it."

Buffy nodded. It just seemed like the thing to do. "Yours," she managed to pant. "All yours."

"Bloody right you are." The words were more a roar than a gasp, his fangs bursting into his mouth, and she knew what was coming next. Knew and craved it almost as much as she craved him, but that was okay because the cravings were intertwined. She couldn't have one without the other. The sting of his bite came, that blessed rush of pain before it blitzed out and exploded into pleasure, and a strangled cry erupted from her throat, her pussy clamping tight around his cock as he thrust and snarled and finally began to shoot inside of her. And she loved that, too. How he was both monster and man in those moments, and hers above all else.

Spike never drank too much—or at least he hadn't yet. Like most other things that pertained to them, Buffy imagined there were stories behind everything he did or didn't do. Things they had learned together, perfected over time—things he would consider intuitive now, things that she would have to learn from scratch. That thought wasn't one she liked, though, so she tried not to linger. She wanted this time to be just them as they were presently, not the them they could never be. No going backward or wondering *what if*. Their road went strictly forward, and that was the path to follow. After all, it was the only road they had.

Her legs were still wobbling when he pulled his fangs free and turned to switch off the water that had been little more than a set piece for the afternoon's—now early evening's—continued sexcapades. She would need to wash properly at some point, clean off the places that were sore and sticky. That had actually been her intention in coming in here, then Spike had followed, muttered something about rechristening the bath, and she hadn't had the will or desire to dissuade him. Everything from the moment he'd first kissed her had been a pleasant vacation from this thing that was her life. The one piece of this world that had finally gone right by going wrong.

But she didn't want to think about that, either.

Spike kissed her again before finally pulling far enough away that

he slipped out of her. He chuckled at her answering sigh, cupped her cheek and kissed her once more.

"More later," he said, navigating around her to exit the shower. "Wager I oughta get you fed sometime today, yeah?"

For some reason, she had the urge to laugh. Thoughts of food seemed so ordinary for the extraordinary thing that had happened to her, especially the rollercoaster of highs and lows that had been the last twenty-four hours and the looming uncertainty of what the next stretch would bring. Probably a good thing Spike was attuned to all her needs, not just the sexy ones. She wasn't sure she'd remember to eat otherwise.

He looked at her like he'd read her thoughts, grinned and dropped a kiss against her shoulder. "Fancy a wash-up in the meantime?"

"You mean the thing I came in here to do?"

"Was that why you came down here? Reckoned you were lookin' to get shagged."

"Oh yeah? How's that?"

"Somethin' to do with you flashin' your tits in my face." He chuckled again when she rolled her eyes, then tugged her close to brush her lips with his again. "Hard to keep my mitts to myself now," he said in one of those low, rumbly voices that had her knees doing the knocking thing. "Worry if I stop touchin' you, you'll vanish on me."

She pressed her brow to his shoulder. "Going nowhere."

"Persistent type. I'll just follow, anyway." Spike tugged on her ear with his teeth before finally pulling away. "Don't linger. Likely most of the hot water's gone."

"And whose fault is that?"

He didn't respond, just smirked and helped himself out of the shower. And being that she felt a little of the same blink-and-it'll-vanish nerves, Buffy followed him with her gaze, watched through the glass pane as he plucked a towel off the shelf he had situated near the sink and ran it over his wet hair. The light in this stretch of tunnel was weak but present, thanks to the lamp in the private lavatory, allowing her attention to linger on his pale but very taut backside before he moved into a stretch of shadows and turned the corner back toward the bedroom part of his crypt.

They hadn't stopped for much since waking up, as the tenderness between her thighs could attest, though she was hardly complaining. Considering the bravado she had borrowed to come here, tell him the things she'd told him even after everything that had happened, the fact that Spike would embrace her at all, come to the conclusions he had, still seemed more wishful thinking than anything she might actually get for herself. And as much as she would like to pretend otherwise, there was a bit of worry, too, lingering there in the periphery. Worry that she didn't want to allow time to fester and develop into something stronger, knowing as she did that some of the things she thought would be there always and no amount of talking or rationalizing could make them go away.

What mattered was that she was here, and he wanted her, loved her. That the future was theirs to define and not reliant on the past. It sounded very neat and tidy in her head, enough so that she felt a surge of reassurance just by thinking it, but she worried how it would withstand scrutiny.

Better not to wonder too hard about that. Keep her focus on what was important—the things she could change, not questions that might never be answered. Or have answers that would dampen how she felt at the moment.

Ten minutes later, clean and wearing a fresh set of pajama bottoms and another tank, Buffy pulled herself out of the hatch from the lower level and into the homey kitchen area where Spike, dressed only in his jeans, was busy fixing a plate of sandwiches.

"Turkey, ham, and Swiss?" she asked, resetting the stone that led downstairs. "It's like you know me or something."

Spike snickered, finished slathering on a helping of mayo along the bread, then spun around and set the plate on the table. "Eat up so I can get back to eating you."

Buffy wrinkled her nose as she sat. "How romantic."

He rumbled another one of those low laughs that had her pressing her thighs together. "Want romance, sweet, all you gotta do is ask."

"I wouldn't say no to wining and dining."

A smile stretched his lips, wide and genuine. "Sorta thing we can do now," he said, grabbing a jar of blood from the fridge before joining her

at the table. "No worries about bein' caught. All your mates know, too." He unscrewed the jar's lid. "Show you a right good time, love. Our kinda night."

"That sounds nice. And potentially disastrous."

"Oi. Think I don't know how to woo a lady?"

"I think your last serious girlfriend and I have very different tastes and what made her swoon probably won't work on me."

Spike rolled his eyes, threw back a mouthful of blood. "I've had you swoonin' plenty, pet," he replied. "Just seems I gotta prove myself all over again."

Buffy paused, set the sandwich she'd started to nibble on back onto her plate, some of the thoughts she'd been doing a decent job not thinking pushing against her resistance. "Does that bother you?" she asked. "I mean, of course it bothers you. You told me it does, and it would bother anyone."

She regretted saying it almost at once. There hadn't been a need—it certainly wasn't like either of them would forget what had happened to bring them where they were. Still, the words were out now. All she could do was deal with them.

As it was, Spike took his time replying. He nudged the blood jar in a circle along the table, watching the liquid swish against the glass. "Gonna be like I said earlier. Get to do it twice with you. Makes me a lucky bloke."

"Is that really how you think of this? As luck?"

"You're here, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I'm here. And I..." She pressed her eyes shut, feeling a familiar surge of self-hate. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything."

"No," Spike drawled, leaning forward. "Not the way we do things, love. Tell me what's the matter."

Buffy shook her head and peeled a strip of crust off her sandwich. "I don't... I think it's just something I'll have to get through on my own. None of this would have happened if I hadn't been stupid. And I'd still be here, just the one who you don't have to redo anything with."

"Buffy—"

"Spike, you were devastated last night. You went from that to...to...

I guess I just don't see how that works." The last she said in a rush, her voice barely audible to her own ears. "How you can be that hurt and then...with me."

He was on his feet the next instant, his movements quick and angry. And again, she wished she had just kept her mouth shut, because up until around ninety seconds ago, they had been having a nice day. The best day. And she wanted more of that—more of the way he was with her and only her. There was no doubt in those moments, no room for second thoughts to creep in and spread. But she'd known this, too. She'd known it when she'd come here and when she'd told him she loved him, and she'd known it when he'd kissed her and rolled her under him. Perhaps stupidly, she'd hoped that words and action would be enough to keep those doubts from growing.

Words could be lies, though, and action the same. She should know.

"Gonna drive me right outta my head, aren't you?" Spike snapped, reeling back at her. "All you told me last night—that's still true, yeah? You love me?"

"What? Of course, it's—"

"What I told you is true, too." He paced a length up the table, then back again. "Who you are hasn't changed a lick. Still Buffy, still the woman I love through and through. God knows no one can aggravate me the way you do."

"But if you could choose—"

"I can't." Spike stopped pacing abruptly, glaring at her, his chest rising and falling with his harsh, heavy breaths. "Askin' if I wish you remembered what it was like before? Of course I do. Askin' if I wish you, as you are, right now, weren't here? Not on your bloody life. It's all you—all Buffy. I want all of you. Every bit I can get. I want the Buffy who remembers what we had. I also want the Buffy who finally tossed Angel out on his arse. More than all that, I want the Buffy who loves me. Long as that's you, you're it for me."

Buffy's lower lip began to tremble, and the next thing she knew, Spike was against her, drawing her into his arms.

"You make me barmy, you know that?" he murmured, stroking a

hand down her back. He kissed her temple, lingered there a moment before pulling away. "Out of my bloody head."

"I'm sorry," she whispered, and she meant it with everything she had. Though still not sure exactly what she believed—if it would ever make sense to her the way it seemed to him, that things could have changed so dramatically in such a short period of time. That he could mourn her and love her simultaneously, break as he had, accept what it meant but love her just as much for all she was and wasn't. "I just want it to be real."

Spike kissed her brow now, then her cheek. "Me too, love," he said. "Couldn't stand it if it weren't."

Buffy cracked a smile, met his mouth with hers when he reached for it. "Everything today has been...just everything," she said against his lips. "But I can't stop thinking. I just don't want to be anyone's replacement."

"There is no replacin' you, Summers. There's just you."

"I might take some convincing."

He huffed a little laugh. "Lucky you, I'm a persistent sorta bloke. And I got all the time in the world. Didn't go into this without thinkin' it through."

She knew that. For as spontaneous and reckless as Spike could be, he hadn't immediately jumped when she'd told him she loved him. That he had waited, even a handful of hours, spoke volumes.

Her life since she had arrived in this world—hell, since returning from the dead—had been a series of problems. With the bulk of them answered now, it could be her brain was looking to invent a few where none existed. What she needed was time—despite everything that had happened since she'd made the wishes, only a few days had passed overall. Not even a full week. Yet those days had been marathons. The sharp pivot their relationship had taken would throw anyone off balance, no matter how good the pivot itself had been. And hell, since she'd landed here, they had been moving at a grueling pace, clashing and smashing and finally crashing together. Now they were this and this was everything. More than everything.

The way Spike loved was still something she didn't fully understand, and maybe she never would. All she knew was it was intense and

all-consuming, and for some reason hers. Here and in the world she'd left behind. Every action he'd taken since his disastrous declaration of love had been a means to prove that, and he had, over and over. Whether she had been here or not. In spite of the fact that as a vampire, he shouldn't be able to act selflessly. In spite of the fact that her friends—her soul-having friends, not to mention her soul-having ex—hadn't done the same.

In both worlds, her friends had resurrected her for *them*. In both worlds, Angel had used her death as an excuse to escape for *himself*. And in both worlds, Spike had remained dedicated to watching over the sister she loved, for *her*.

Buffy straightened, remembering suddenly what Angel had said about the lawyer who was coming. She hadn't let herself think about that too much—her brain a bit muddled where the paw was concerned—but now that her path was set, it was time to start planning the next fight.

"We should talk about Dawn," Buffy said as Spike returned to his chair.

If he was surprised at the abrupt change in subject, he didn't let it show. He just nodded, picked up his jar of blood, and went with the flow as always. And again, she experienced a rush of love for him so profound she had to fight the urge to just start bawling like a crazy woman.

"Well," he said, "we got the goods now, don't we? Intent was always to hand over the paw once you found it."

"You still think that's a good idea?"

Spike lifted a shoulder. "Quickest way to get her home."

And there was the other side—the part that balanced Spike out, monster and man. Love him though she did, she wasn't surprised that his answer triggered some serious warning bells. Spike often went for the quickest, easiest route to accomplish his end goal, and his plans rarely went all hitchless. They had a tendency to backfire rather spectacularly.

Then there was the subject of the paw itself—something that she had known so little about until forced to learn trial-by-fire style. The amount of firepower it wielded, the amount of harm it could do, was

not the sort of thing to take lightly. From what Buffy had learned about the law firm, she had to assume the people in charge wouldn't be going in blind the way she and Singer had. Wanting the paw in the first place had been a little suspect for such a large operation, and if Angel was to be believed, they already had no shortage of power and influence. The damage they could do with a relic that held that much fuel could be catastrophic.

"How did I feel about this before the switch?" she asked.

"How do you mean?"

"I mean handing over a massively destructive dark artifact to a bunch of bad guys in blazers. I doubt I was all okay with it."

He thought a moment before shrugging again. "Didn't love it, no, but it was for her, wasn't it? When you talked about it, you were more just dead set on finding the bloody thing. Plan as far as I knew was to cough it up the second you could. Get her home. Wagered whatever happened was on Angel for creatin' the mess in the first place."

"Okay," Buffy said slowly. "Then what did I know about the paw?"

"That the lawyer gits thought Rupert had it," Spike replied, calm and still seemingly not thrown by her questions. "Piece of dark mojo that grants wishes."

That the law firm wanted in exchange for her sister. Oh, and the shop, which she couldn't technically own since she was still legally dead. A newly resurrected Buffy confronted with those issues likely wouldn't stop to think too much about the larger implications of turning over the paw. It was a quick solution and Buffy had been all about the quick solutions. Looking for one or three was how she'd gotten to this world in the first place.

"Angel said he went to LA," Buffy announced after swallowing another bite of sandwich. "The day that I... Well, with the gun. We were wondering where he was, and that's where. He got something from Cordelia and decided to answer in person. See if he could find out more about Dawn."

Spike snorted. "Undo the mess he made, more like. What a bloody prince."

"He's trying."

"Took his sweet time, didn't he?"

Buffy decided not to reply to that, both because she didn't want to get Spike on an anti-Angel kick and because she agreed with him. But considering the way her last conversation with Angel had gone—tense and difficult but definitely not as bad as it could have—she was more inclined at the moment to be gracious until given a fresh reason not to be.

"Apparently, the guy who talked to me before about the paw is someone he knows," she said instead. "He called in a favor with the gang from LA to see if there might be an angle besides the paw. Don't know if it'll amount to anything but the lawyer's coming here to talk."

Spike lowered the jar. "Take it since you're not doin' cartwheels that there's a problem."

"I don't love the idea of handing over something as dark and powerful as the paw to people who are dark and powerful." She blew out a breath. "Even for Dawn. Especially after everything we know about it now. How it works. What it did to me and to Singer. What Willow said last night about how it wants to be used specifically to do damage. Giving it to them would be the easy thing to do—like using the paw was in the first place. But I don't think it's right."

He didn't say anything for a moment, rather gulped down another mouthful of blood. Then a small smile flitted across his face, one full of warmth and love.

"There you are," he said. "That's the Slayer I know. Can't do anything simple."

"Simple now could mean apocalypse later. I kinda want to avoid one of those."

"Dunno. Next one could be a hoot."

"Spike."

"'Course, that's the evil talkin'." The smile turned into a smirk and he nudged her foot with his under the table. "Can't shag all that outta me, though I do hope you try."

Buffy glanced down, fighting a grin of her own. "If at first you don't succeed..."

"That's the spirit, love." Spike ran his tongue over his teeth when she looked up again, his eyes dancing, and held her gaze as he polished off the rest of his blood. She didn't know how he did it—look so good

while doing something so gross—but he pulled it off with aplomb. "So," he said a moment later, "when's this lawyer git set to arrive?"

"I don't know. Angel just said he'd come find me when he arrives."

"Here."

She nodded. "I told him this was where I'd be."

He huffed at that, shaking his head. "Gonna take a while to wrap my lobes around that. And still not sure I trust the pillock not to come at me with a stake first chance he gets."

"I don't think he will," Buffy said, and didn't react to Spike's answering snort. "He was surprised and hurt, but when I told him I'd stop him if he tried anything, it was like he'd never thought of it."

"Trust me, pet, he thought of it."

There seemed little point in arguing so she didn't bother. "He *wasn't* surprised that you were in love with me. Said he'd known for a while. The stuff with Glory was kind of a major tip-off, I guess. And how you reacted after I jumped."

Spike shrugged again, focusing on the table between them. "Suppose the big oaf's bound to be right some of the time. Surprised he didn't come over to lord it over me—me bein' hopeless for his missus must've been a kick. Always was when it was Dru." He was quiet a moment longer, looking like he might be somewhere else. Then he blew out a breath, shook his head, and raised his gaze to hers, and she knew the topic had been dropped. "Well, seein' as we're waitin' for a drop-in from your husband, do you fancy a night in? Thought we could patrol, then catch somethin' on the telly. Just you and me tonight."

Buffy pressed her lips together to fight back a grin. "I dunno. Let me check my calendar."

But he didn't grin back, and when his eyes fell again, she realized she had misread something. That there was a specific point he was trying to make—or going to lengths to not make, hoping she'd get there on her own. To what end, she didn't know.

Finally, he seemed to understand that brilliance was not going to strike her and released a deep sigh. "Didn't know if you'd want to see your mates or not. Tell them the good news. 'Bout you officially kickin' the ball and chain to the curb and gettin' yourself somethin' better. Did say they liked me more than the big sod, yeah?"

Even with that, it took another moment for Buffy's confusion to turn into understanding. Once it did, her heart twisted. "I will tell them, Spike. Gonna be kinda hard to keep under wraps."

"Whatever you like."

"Do you really think I wouldn't?"

"Not sure. Brave new world, yeah, but some things are the same. Still a killer. Still a vampire. Still—"

"You're forgetting the cat is out of the bag."

"Different when it's a sidepiece and when it's your honey, though, isn't it?"

Buffy's throat tightened. He was serious. "You said that it being an affair wouldn't change things for you, if we got to do it right. It's not about the excitement or—"

"No, it's not. Not for me." He met her eyes again. "Never was for me. Was always about you."

Once more, she didn't know what he was saying. Or trying to get her to say. Everything that had happened here, everything she had seen, had reinforced how very much this world's Buffy had loved Spike. The fact that biting was a thing they did on the regular drove that home like little else could—even the numerous anecdotes, the cryptful of Buffy staples, and the way Spike had modified his life around her. Letting a vampire bite her was something she'd never done before, except to save Angel's life, and given that it had resulted in her being ushered to the hospital for an emergency transfusion, she didn't think it counted.

But then, Spike was used to being on the outside looking in. He had been for years—longer, even, the way he talked about his relationship with Drusilla. The idea that he might not be was probably too novel for him to just accept at face value.

She experienced a pang that the other Buffy had never done anything to reassure him, wondered if that would be a thing she regretted, wherever she had ended up. Hoping for the first time that she *had* ended up in the other world because it would give her the chance to do certain things right.

"Spike, when I say I love you, it's not conditional. Not now and not whenever we were together before. Hell, I had to have been at least

halfway in love with you before we started having sex. Probably more than halfway." She offered a smile when he tilted his head, giving her that look like he'd never seen her before. "Buffy doesn't cheat because it's fun or exciting. I am so not my father's daughter where that is concerned. You had it right all along—what you told me in the beginning. I felt trapped and suffocated and I didn't think I could cut Angel loose because it was my fault he was here in the first place. I felt responsible for him, that I owed him, and as long as he stayed with me, I had to stay with him. It wasn't right—I told Angel it had been killing me, and I know it had because even thinking about it..." Buffy shuddered. "You and me means you and me. No more hiding."

A heavy silence fell between them, heavier than she had expected, Spike regarding her closely, the wheels behind his eyes in constant motion. Eventually, maybe, she'd get used to not knowing what to expect when he did this. Knowing he was thinking but not knowing what—or perhaps he was still hiding, himself, as she was still hiding. Not trusting yet the new territory they were covering. At least this was one thing she would get to do with him, not hear about.

"I knew it," Spike said, and sniffed, looking away, but not before she saw the wet shine in his eyes. "Knew it. The way you loved me... I just knew it. But it's nice to hear, you know?"

Buffy nodded, fighting back the urge to cry, herself. "Nice to say, too." A pause. "But...about my friends, about what you asked, I *don't* want to see them tonight."

"No?"

"No." She swallowed, unsure that she trusted she could articulate the confusing tangle of thoughts where her friends were concerned. The things she'd overheard Willow and Xander whispering about a few nights ago were still fresh, as was the way Willow had sounded every time they'd spoken in the interim. Not like herself, not like her best friend. The fact that Buffy had felt disconnected from the gang ever since the resurrection didn't help matters, either. It could well be they never found their way back to how things had been once. It could be that the Scoobies were over.

And that—thoughts of what her life would look like without her friends, without Giles—was too big for her brain at the moment. She

hadn't even slowed down enough to mourn her watcher, accept that she was the one who had to live with the consequences of her wish. For the past few days, that had existed as *other* space in her head. An awful reality but not her reality, except it was now. And god, she didn't even know how to begin telling Dawn all this. She didn't even know if her sister knew she was alive.

The enormity of what still lay ahead crashed down upon her at once and with such force she found herself gripping the table, on the cusp of either a panic attack or a mad case of the giggles. It seemed utterly mad that she had, just a few minutes ago, sat here and wondered if her brain was creating problems where none existed out of boredom. She still had plenty to process that had nothing to do with her relationship with Spike and her lingering fears that she was just a replacement for the Buffy he'd lost. The one she'd lost for him.

"Slayer?" Spike slid a hand over hers, jarring her out of her spiraling thoughts and back to the present with him. "You all right, pet?"

Buffy let out a slow breath, trying to force away the tension that had gathered in her neck and shoulders. "No," she said. "It all just... Things with my friends are complicated right now. It just occurred to me how much." She waited, then met his eyes, and what she saw there —the return of one thing she'd thought she'd lost—granted her with calm. Not forever but for the moment, and right now the moment was enough. "Suffice to say, for now, a night in, just you and me, sounds amazing."

He nodded and gave her a soft smile—the sort that told her she needn't bother with an explanation. That like so many other things, he understood.

"Whatever my lady wants," he said. "Anything at all."

"Have I mentioned that I love you?"

"Mighta come up. Still..." He waggled his eyebrows. "Plenty of ways to show me, if you fancy really gettin' the point across."

"That can be arranged."

"Can't bloody wait."

A WAY TO show him popped into her head on patrol. Well, if she were honest, it had popped into her head intermittently throughout the day as well, though she hadn't let it linger. Not because she didn't want to do it—she very much wanted to do it, and that was something Buffy could say with certainty was completely unique to Spike. She had done it before, of course. It was a girlfriend thing to do, and she'd been determined to be a very loving, giving girlfriend—even if it had done jack in the end to keep her last boyfriend from fleeing the country, the continent apparently being too small for the two of them.

It wasn't that Buffy hadn't liked doing it for...other people. She had. Kind of. And it had been worth it. She'd known a good time was had by said boyfriend—kinda hard to fake that—but even though Riley hadn't been shy to tell her what he did or didn't like, there was a clear difference between the kind of communicating she'd experienced then and the lavish praise Spike unleashed whenever she touched him. And she wanted that—wanted to know what he'd be like if she wrapped her mouth around him.

Only trouble was, every time the thought popped into her head, she couldn't help but remember what had happened before. It was different now—everything was different—but tell that to her brain. In truth, the details about that day were a bit hazy. She remembered that she'd had a dream, a bad one, and woken up feeling about as alone as she ever had. Spike had been there, grinding against her and wanting someone else, and a switch had flipped. It had only lasted a handful of seconds, but those seconds had redefined everything she knew about herself.

Buffy wanted to bring it up that night but lost her nerve. Also, Spike distracted her by throwing her onto the bed the second they made the journey from the upper level to the lower one. Waking up was no better. Well, that was a lie. It was *way* better—finally, one of those early morning grindings led somewhere happy—but she didn't find the nerve to even begin to do the thing she wanted to do. And it stayed with her throughout the day until finally, Buffy found herself blurting, "I want to give you a blowjob," while pretending to watch that afternoon's episode of *Passions*.

Spike, who had been absently stroking her back, his attention fixed

on his tiny, grainy screen, went still. Like, really still. Buffy, on the other hand, couldn't stop fidgeting. She'd been sitting rather ramrod straight on the edge of the couch, twisting her fingers in her lap and trying to work out how, exactly, to proposition her...whatever he was. All the labels her brain tried on for size seemed silly and inadequate. In the end, announcing she wanted to suck his cock without any sort of tease or lead-in might not have been the sexiest or most romantic approach, but at least it made her intentions clear.

After a long moment during which Spike said nothing, she finally felt the couch beside her shift, then he was on his feet, striding toward the television. For a second, she wondered if the outburst had been only in her head—this was *not* the way she'd expected Spike to react to such a declaration—but then the TV was off and he was turning to look at her, his eyes dark and his jeans looking a bit bulgy in the groin area.

And stupidly, Buffy blinked up at him, her heart starting to do that rabbity thing. "What?" she asked.

Spike stared at her a second longer, then smirked and lowered his hands to his belt. "Been sittin' on that long, have you?"

Great. Now her cheeks were going hot. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said, trying to look away. Trying but not succeeding. Watching Spike work the buckle, drag his fingers over his erection, was its own kind of aphrodisiac. She didn't realize she'd wetted her lips until he groaned and started back toward the couch.

"Uh huh," he drawled, that smirk of his growing ever wider. "Now's not the time to get shy on me, pet. Any particular way you wanna suck me off? Always love seein' you on your knees but know the stone's not too forgiving. Can just keep your pert little arse right where you are. Or do you want me on my back? I aim to please."

"Oh good. We're going to make a big thing out of this."

Spike chuckled, sauntering forward a few more steps, playing with the zipper. "Already a big thing," he replied. "Wanna feel how big?"

"Believe me, I've felt."

"Mmm. Not with this." He reached over and outlined her lips with a finger. "Least not to your recollection. You set the stage, pet. I'll go wherever you want me."

Buffy inhaled deeply, looking up into his eyes. "It's not the first time," she said, not wanting to but needing to all the same. Maybe if she were someone else, she could have retorted with something sexy or at least flirty. Something that would get his eyes going even darker than they were now, deep with the promise of how he intended to pay her back. But she wasn't a different person, and she couldn't just pretend. "Spike—"

But she stopped short when he furrowed his brow and his smile evaporated. Saw that he knew what she was going to say, saw a combination of frustration and fondness there, a good helping of confusion thrown in for good measure. She wasn't letting him get past it the longer she stayed in that moment, and that wasn't his burden to bear. It was hers. All that mattered was right here, right now, he wanted her. Wanted all of her, even the part of her that had hurt him.

Buffy released a long breath, dropping her eyes to his crotch. He was still hard, still straining against the denim. This right now was about giving him something she wanted to give him—not begging for scraps of reassurance.

Still, she couldn't help the way her hand trembled when she reached to undo the button of his jeans. "Is this okay?" she asked.

"Better if you didn't look like you might faint."

She glanced up at him again. "I do want to do this, Spike."

Spike flicked an eyebrow, like he wasn't sure he believed her. Then, slowly, some of his playfulness returned. "Yeah? How much?"

"A lot."

"Mmm. Think I wanna hear it," he said, grinning wider still. "Say, 'Spike, I wanna suck your cock.'"

It was exactly the sort of thing she'd never thought she'd say—to him or anyone. Talking about things like this, bluntly and without the cover of euphemisms, was unexplored territory. But she loved it when Spike made with the dirty talk and fair was only fair. So Buffy fought to keep her eyes on him, fought not to bristle or shake or blush. More than she was already, at least. "Spike," she said, "I want to suck your cock."

A low, deep moan rumbled through his chest, and he nodded hard, batting her hands away and lowering the zipper. "Fuck, I want that

too," he said, diving a hand inside his fly, and then his cock was wrapped in his fist and straining toward her. Buffy let out another long breath, or one was forced through her chest. For a second all she could do was stare as she hadn't before. Not downstairs and not in the shower, either, beyond the times he had directed her gaze to the way their bodies moved together. He was curved slightly upward—which she thought explained a few things—long and thick, the head swollen and dotted with beads of precum. How he could do that, go from zero to ready in seconds, was something she doubted she'd ever understand. But then, understanding was overrated. All she really needed to know was that the want inside her had turned into need. She *needed* him inside her mouth.

That was a thought she'd never had about a penis before. Like everything else Spike-related, experiencing it was exhilarating.

"God, you look hungry," he said, his voice shaking. He worked one hand slowly up the length of his shaft and she watched—unable to do anything but—as the foreskin rolled forward, swallowing the head, then smoothed back again. "All yours, baby. All of me is all yours."

Buffy felt both ridiculously aware of herself and disconnected from her body at the same time. She inched herself closer to the edge of the sofa, wrapped a hand around the base of his cock, and tried not to shiver at his answering sigh. She had touched and squeezed him a few times between yesterday and this moment, but not with such singular intent. Now, she watched as his flesh moved with her strokes, which started off slow but then her brain switched back on and she remembered that she'd done this before. Only she also hadn't because it was *Spike,* and he made every encounter feel new again. The way he felt in her hand, against her skin, how much of him there was, the way he responded just to being touched.

"So hot," he whispered. "Always so fucking hot."

And though she wanted nothing more than to not think about it, Buffy couldn't stop her mind from taking her back to the morning she had done *the bad thing*. Everything that had happened then had been hurried, pushed by a desire to keep ahead of his thoughts and realizations, make it so he wanted her there. She remembered more or less stuffing him in her mouth and pulling hard, fast, and then it had been

over. That was the opposite of what she wanted now, so she started slow. First by pressing a kiss to the base of his cock before letting her lips wander up the length of the shaft. By the time she reached the head, Spike was breathing hard and had a ribbon of her hair wrapped around his fist. She paused when she reached the tip, then licked off the precum that had gathered there.

"Oh fuck, yes." The words tumbled out of him as though by accident—like he had been trying to keep them inside but couldn't any longer. "Your tongue... God, I love your tongue. Do that again."

Since he asked so nicely... Buffy slipped her tongue along the dip in his cockhead, grinning when he moaned again, thrust his hips forward. She fisted his cock and began to stroke, finding a rhythm somewhere between too fast and too slow, watching with rapt attention at the way he moved with her. He strained forward, almost pushy but not, though she could tell that was with practiced restraint. It only made her hotter.

"Slayer, please..."

The need in his voice was a heady thing. Buffy found she rather enjoyed it. And she wanted to give in almost immediately, but knowing what he wanted and being in a place to give it was *also* pretty darn heady. So instead, she decided to play coy. "Please what?"

Spike blinked an eye open and glared at her. "You gonna put your mouth on me or tease me all night?"

"My mouth? Like this?" She licked a path up the length of his cock, ducked when he growled and tightened his grip on her hair. "Or is that not what you mean?"

It was tame, probably. This level of teasing. The other Buffy had probably perfected the art of torturing Spike with her mouth eons ago. But she had to start somewhere, and she found she liked this just fine. And even if it was tame, the way he reacted made her feel like a master.

"Think you're funny, do you?" he asked, both eyes open now, one eyebrow arched. "I'm not the one who gets precious about the words."

"So why don't you say them?"

He curled his lip and tried to leverage the hold he had on her hair to his advantage, direct her mouth toward his cock. The look on his

face was so brazen that she wanted to smack him and suck him in equal measure. "Right then," he purred. "Open wide for me."

Buffy drew the tip of him between her lips and fed him a low moan of her own, just enough to let him feel the vibrations, sigh and nod and mutter, "Good girl," before making to thrust forward—then she pulled away again with a giggle.

Spike grunted. "Enjoyin' yourself, are you?"

"Hey, you give as good as you're getting. Better, actually."

"Mhmm. Seems like the sorta thing a clever bird like you might keep in mind."

"Are you done talking?" she replied, more emboldened by the second. Her heart had taken off at a pace, and her skin was heating, it seemed, from the inside, but the burn was sweet, and she wanted more of it. "'Cause I have things to do."

"Buff—"

She closed her mouth around him and drew him in by inches, and whatever Spike had been about to say fell away on a moan. He threw his head back instead, the grip he had on her hair going somewhat slack, then tightening again though in such a way she knew—not knowing how she knew, but knowing she was right all the same—that it was more to anchor himself than hold her in place. And as much fun as tormenting had been, Buffy found herself instantly addicted to this. To the way he looked right now, torn and tortured but addicted to the pain, his mouth hanging open, his eyes squeezed shut, sounds she'd never made anyone make before tumbling over his lips. By the time she had her nose buried in the curls at his groin, her mouth full of him, Spike had started sputtering her name like a prayer, gently massaging her head with roughened fingertips.

Then she pulled back with the same exquisite slowness, the same pressure, and he hissed and stroked the back of her head.

"So good." He blinked and opened his eyes, moaning again when he looked down and caught her with his wet tip pressed against her lips. "Fuck."

So she did it again, quicker this time but not by much. Spike tightened his hold on her again and began rocking his hips, and in seconds they were moving together. Buffy pulling, sucking, letting her tongue

wander over the contours of his cock as he pumped and pushed and guided her in increasingly hurried strokes. She wasn't used to this—to being led, directed, controlled—but she found she kinda liked it, mainly because she knew the true power was still hers. If she had any doubt, it vanished every time her name spilled from his lips.

"Such a hot mouth," he said, staring at her now, his gaze flicking between her eyes and the sight of his cock sliding between her lips. "So good. Such a good girl. Lick me like that. Fuck *yes,* Buffy. Harder. Harder now. Don't be afraid to hurt. Gimme all you got. I want it. Harder, *yeah,* that's right."

An idea popped into her head and she acted without thought, lowering her teeth just enough that he felt the scrape every time he thrust inside. It was something she never would have dared try with anyone else, and though it only lasted about half a second, she had started mentally composing her apology before he roared, his fangs bursting into his mouth as he pumped himself into her harder, nodding with such fierce approval.

"Oh yeah, baby. Know how to play, don't you?" He gave her another long moan, and she worried she might do something to ruin the moment, like burst into tears. "Now, tuck your lips over your teeth. That's it. Every time I pull out, press down."

She did, and he damn near roared. Buffy watched, fascinated, as he strained his neck, his fangs bared. She'd never gotten turned on during a blowjob, but she was now. God, she could feel it—the slickness between her legs, her pussy heavy and her clit throbbing, forcing her to press her thighs together. And she had no secrets from him, knew the second he growled again it was because he knew it, his nostrils flaring and his lips pulling into a knowing leer. He trailed his tongue down the side of one fang, waggled his eyebrows, and she just knew he was going to say something to make her skin burn even hotter, so she rushed to beat him—wipe the smug off his face. The next time he thrust in deep, she seized him by the ass and sucked him in as far as she could manage, somehow ignoring the need to gag, waited, then worked her throat muscles around the head of his cock.

And that was it. Spike shuddered, his fingers woven through her hair as he pulsed and spurted his release down her throat. While it

wasn't sudden, it did surprise her, as did her own reaction to it—how the throb between her legs intensified nearly to the point of distraction. Somehow, though, Buffy maintained the presence of mind to keep her lips in motion, pressing against the base of his cock in a rhythm that had him damn near weeping her name. It seemed like a long time, long enough that her eyes started to water, but eventually, he pulled back, his shaft sliding along her tongue, swelling as it went, then falling free of her mouth altogether.

He was already hard again. Hard and slick with her saliva, and when she met his eyes, she couldn't help but whimper.

"Strip," he said, panting and closing his hand around his length once more. "And show me how wet that made you."

Buffy wasn't sure how she managed it—shaking as she was, watching him watch her as he stroked himself—but somehow, she did, the fabric of the sofa scraping along her bare thighs as the cool crypt air flirted with her nipples. And then he was on her, shoving her against the cushions, mauling kisses off her lips and teasing a wet line up and down her slit with his dick, chuckling when she gasped and positioning himself right where she wanted him.

God, whatever was coming was about to be *so* good.

Then a throat cleared. It was such a small sound, given the way her blood thundered in her ears, but it was as effective as a record scratch.

"Oh god."

Spike stiffened as well, his jaw tight. "Balls." He sucked in his cheeks and tossed an angry glare over his shoulder. "What the fuck do you want? Mite busy at the mo'."

"I did knock," Angel said. He stood near the door, studying the stone floor, his face a shade of red Buffy hadn't seen before on anyone. "A few times."

"Yeah. Proper thing to do when no one answers is *bugger off*."

"Spike!" Buffy smacked his arm and tried to sit up, but only managed to knock the tip of his erection from her opening to her clit. She bit down hard on her lower lip to stay the gasp that wanted free, then smacked Spike's arm again when she saw him struggling not to laugh. "You knew he was here? What the hell?"

Spike shrugged, pulling back with absolutely no mind for

preserving his modesty or hers. Which she knew was kinda moot, considering the man standing there was technically her husband, but Buffy hadn't been naked around Angel since she was a teenager. She immediately snatched up her pants and forced her shaking legs through the proper holes.

"Believe me, I wouldn't be here if it wasn't important," Angel said. He was still staring at the floor. "Lindsey's here and he's not alone. They want to talk."

23

ROCK ON, ROCK ON, WITH A FASHIONABLE FROWN

In some ways, it was nice to know how completely Spike could still piss her off. Drove home that what she felt for him really was love—that she hadn't changed so much that she found all of his idiosyncrasies charming. Case in point: the fact that he had heard Angel knocking and decided to ignore it was one of those things she wanted to punch him over.

"We knew he would be coming by," she hissed as they followed Angel back out of the cemetery. The sun had just set, allowing them all to go together, though the jury was still out on whether that was a good thing, considering the circumstances. "We *knew*. And you let him walk in on us like that."

Spike's answering shrug did little to quell the urge to hit him. Hell, he seemed downright giddy and had yet to stop smirking. "Had to smell him on you plenty over the last year," he replied. "Fair's fair he got to know what that felt like."

"Oh my god, grow up. I'm *married* to him."

"Yeah. And like I said, you stank of it for a right long time."

Buffy rolled her eyes and hurried her steps to catch up with Angel, which was no small feat considering he was a giant and she was vertically challenged. "Hey," she said, a bit breathless as she fell into pace

beside him. "I'm... *Sorry* isn't a big enough word for what you saw back there. Believe me, if I had known—"

"I know," Angel retorted shortly. "And it's... I should have been prepared."

"I don't know how you could've been prepared for that."

"Years of experience say otherwise. Believe me, that Spike is an immature ass isn't exactly news." He shook his head, flicked a glance at her out of the corner of his eye. "Thanks, though. To be honest, I think I was more shocked by the décor than what you were doing."

"The décor?"

He nodded, offered a pained grimace. "It looked like...well, *Buffy*. Just drove home everything you told me the other night. She—*you're* really with him." Angel breathed out. "I should've seen it. Should have realized—"

"It's not your fault. It's mine."

"Not entirely, though, right?" He glanced at her again. "You're not my Buffy."

"No, but—"

"You would have been. I know, you said it the other night." Angel came to an abrupt halt then turned to face her. "I'll say this now so I don't have to later. Am I okay? No. I am not. I've been going over it pretty much nonstop since you left—the things you said... You were right. We were both unhappy. I feel like I've been in a coma for the last year and a half. Resenting you and myself. Knowing you felt the same way but so determined to make you crack first, blaming you for everything. She couldn't talk to me, I know. Every time she tried, we fought. That she found someone else to talk to, to...love—I'll never know how that person was Spike, but it's not...something I don't get."

Buffy inhaled and nodded. She couldn't summon the words or the will to do anything more.

"But apparently, it's the same for you. Where Spike is concerned." He threw a glance at Spike, who had stopped walking when they had and was currently doing a fairly terrible job of pretending he wasn't listening to every word. "You two..."

"It hasn't been since I got here," Buffy said quickly, though not sure

why it mattered, only that it did. "It really just started the night I... well, came clean with you."

He arched an eyebrow. "Well, even if that weren't the case, it's not like you're the one I married, is it?"

"No." Buffy released a shaky breath, now also looking at Spike, her brain tripping over itself to articulate something she needed Angel to know. To explain. Of the many things she had thought to anticipate the next time she saw him, his understanding—calm and rational—had been at the bottom of the list. And it made everything worse. Anger was expected, more than a little earned. Anger made it easier to feel less like the bad guy in their marriage. For it was her marriage now, no matter where she had been when the vows had been exchanged. This world, its virtues and its tragedies, belonged to her, and she had to live with the decisions she'd made.

Except the explanations she had meant little in the end. She couldn't justify her way out of infidelity, no matter how much she wanted to try. Expounding on the fact, trying to make Angel understand what she and Spike had—what *his* Buffy and Spike had shared—would mean lancing a wound that had yet to stop bleeding from the first jab. Her discomfort with her reality was not worth the price of adding to whatever pain Angel was already grappling with.

Maybe if he were angry, lashing out, trying to cut her down. But he wasn't. Damn him.

"I'm just...sorry," she finished lamely. "For all of it. You're being pretty great about everything, which I really don't get and know I don't deserve."

Something that might have been a smile flirted with Angel's lips, but it was gone before she could make a judgment call. "You're seeing the result of two days of drinking, throwing things, and calling you pretty much every name in the book, if it makes you feel better. Oh, and I definitely had a moment or several where I was sure I was going to try to stake him."

"Is it totally weird that that *does* make me feel better?"

He snorted a little laugh—the kind that was more performative than genuine—and glanced down. "I meant it when I said I couldn't do

what we were doing anymore. It was always going to end, and badly. Doesn't make getting to the end any easier."

"I get it." Buffy took a step back. "And again, sorry for...well, earlier. It was never my intention to rub your face in anything. If I'd known you were there, I would have... Let's just say you wouldn't have seen nearly as much of me or him as you did."

"Well, that's what you get when you fall in love with a jackass like Spike."

"I totally deserve that."

Angel gave her a hard look as though trying to determine whether or not she was making fun of him, capped it with a short nod, then started walking once more in a hurried way that told her he didn't want her to keep up. Which was also fair. So Buffy waited until Spike was at her side again and didn't hesitate to seize his hand when he offered it.

"Have it all out?" he asked in a low rumble.

"Like you didn't hear every word."

"Did. Doesn't mean I know how you feel about it."

She cut him a glance, unsurprised to find his expression guarded. "I feel like letting Angel walk in on us like that was a cheap shot. I get why you did it, but really with the necessary?"

For the first time since they'd left the crypt, something like regret flitted across his eyes. "Right. Bad call."

"Seriously bad."

"Evil, you might say."

She tried not to grin at that, she really did. "I guess you are short on ways to get your evil in these days."

"Gotta seize the opportunity where I see it. Rep's already shot to hell, but the little I have left—"

"Spike."

"Sorry, pet. Next time I have the chance to rub the sod's face in anythin', I'll..." He sighed and rolled his head back. "Well, I'll probably do it anyway, 'cause that's who I am, and it feels bloody brilliant after this last year. Know you didn't live it, but I did, and yeah, I'm enjoyin' seeing him get his." He released her hand, but only so he could throw an arm around her shoulder, like he worried she might take off in a huff. "Lucky you love me though, right?"

"I guess that's the word for it."

He growled and nipped at her ear, sending a hard shiver through her that reminded her about the other downside of being interrupted. While the mood had taken a definite plunge with Angel's presence, her body had yet to fully forgive the fact that she'd gotten all worked up with no payoff.

"Bite your tongue," he murmured. "Or let me. Know I'll make it good for you."

She threw him another glance, this time with a smile in place. "Maybe later. Evil lawyers first."

The evil lawyers, as it turned out, were waiting at Revello Drive. Buffy had wondered at Angel's trajectory as he'd left Restfield, but assumed their destination was more neutral. Given the things Angel had said about Wolfram and Hart, it seemed odd that he would leave them in a place as personal as home while he ran an errand. However, her confusion only lasted as long as it took Angel to open the door, and she saw Willow waiting in the entry.

Ah. Fight fire with fire. That made sense.

"Any trouble?" Angel asked as he shrugged out of his jacket.

"Not even a little," the redhead replied, then favored Buffy with an iffy grin and an even iffier finger-wave. "Hey guys."

Buffy tried to smile back, *wanted* to smile and mean it, but it wouldn't come. "Thanks for coming. I'm guessing you played the role of chaperone."

"Magical reinforcements to the rescue," Willow agreed with strained enthusiasm. At least the awkward was mutual. "He's just lucky my afternoon class was canceled, or I wouldn't have gotten the message in time." She cut her eyes to Angel. "Is that all you need me for? I do have some homework that could use some TLC."

He offered a clipped nod. "That's all. Thanks, Willow. We can handle it from here."

"Yes," came a new voice as a stunning brunette rounded the corner from the living room. She was tall, dressed in a sharp business suit, and wore the sort of expression that would have betrayed her profession had Buffy not already known it. "But be sure to let him know that we

were on our best behavior," she continued, crossing her arms. "We want a good report from the babysitter."

Willow forced out a patently fake laugh, exchanged a look with Angel that all but screamed he owed her big-time, then made her way to the door. "Oh, lawyers," she said brightly. "With the jokes and the funny and I'll just be going then."

Buffy watched her slide past Spike and disappear into the falling night, caught between wanting to say something and glad to be seeing the back of her. At some point, she knew she would have to sit down with Willow and try to see if anything of their relationship was salvageable. Whatever had happened, whatever wrongs had been committed, her friends were her family, had been for years. Once her life had settled somewhat, she imagined their absence would become something like a physical ache. A bit of normalcy she craved in a world where she was starting from scratch.

But that was an issue for tomorrow, or tomorrow's tomorrow. Right now, she had a lawyer-sized fish to fry.

The lawyer in question was studying her with shrewd, narrow eyes, and burst into a fake-warm smile the second their gazes connected. "A pleasure to meet you, Ms. Summers," she said with blindingly manufactured sincerity. "Or I suppose it would be *Missus*... Does Angel even have a last name?"

"Ms. Summers is fine," Buffy said before Angel could cut in. "And given what I know about you, I'm thinking Willow was the exact right amount of firepower in terms of babysitters."

The woman's smile turned shark-like. "Oh, Angel, I like her. I can see why you walked away. Though I'm guessing"—she cast a not-so-conspicuous look at Spike, who had seized Buffy's hand once more—"that the fact you had to go, ahh, collect her from her lover means there is trouble in paradise. So sad."

Oh, hell no.

"Excuse me, who the hell are you?" Buffy snapped. "I'm pretty sure the lawyer Angel mentioned was a guy."

"My apologies, that was rude of me." The woman extended her hand. "Lilah Morgan. I work in the Special Projects Division at Wolfram and Hart. And find it rather gracious of you to classify

Lindsey as a guy. You obviously haven't spent enough time with him. Don't worry, though. A lot of people make that mistake at first."

Buffy gave the outstretched hand a pointed look before raising her eyes again. There were few people she could say she'd hated from first meeting, but Lilah had skyrocketed to the top of that list.

Before she could voice any of this, though, a man came into view. He was about the same age as Lilah, if looks were anything to go off, with a mop of somewhat shaggy hair that was either dark blond or light brown, depending on the lighting. Like Lilah, he wore a suit; unlike Lilah, he looked a bit more rumpled, less coiffed, with his tie and the first couple of buttons on his shirt undone.

This must be Lindsey.

He tossed Lilah a look of mild annoyance—much milder than she deserved—then also extended his hand. "Ms. Summers, always a pleasure."

Right. Because they had met before. Back when a different Buffy had been behind the wheel.

"Yeah," she said. She didn't miss the flash of victory that flared in his eyes when she took his hand over Lilah's. "You, too."

"I would apologize for Lilah," he added, all smooth charm, "but I don't think we have that kind of time."

"I wasn't expecting two of you." She fought a wince at the uncertainty in her voice, hating how obvious she was in her discomfort. "Since it was just you before," she added for good measure.

"Not ideal, but my supervisor insisted."

"Likely because the last time you were entrusted with a client around Angel, that client was shoved out a twenty-fifth story window while you just sat there and watched," Lilah replied, her smile fixed in place.

Buffy arched an eyebrow and glanced at Angel.

"He was a vampire," Angel offered, shrugging. "Claimed he could do anything he wanted with Wolfram and Hart at his back. I asked him if he could fly. Turns out, he couldn't."

As far as methods went, it didn't suck. She fought a grin and couldn't help the thrill that shot through her when Angel met it with a smirk, like they were sharing a joke. It was more of what she'd seen the

other night—when he'd looked and sounded more like himself, the man she'd known once upon a time. All it had taken to get him there was distance from her—acknowledging their reality and confronting the lies that had divided them. Perhaps, eventually, he would find his way back to who he had been and be able to stay there. She hoped so.

"Well," Buffy said, taking Spike's hand again as she turned her focus back to the lawyers, "as much fun as standing in the foyer is, I think this is probably a sitting-down kind of conversation."

Which was how they ended up in the dining room—the lawyers on one side of the table, Buffy and Spike on the other, and Angel at the head, present but deliberately distant all the same. It was definitely the strangest assortment of people she'd ever hosted, and her nerves were beginning to fester. Nerves she had more or less been able to ignore until now, focused as she had been on other things. But with the moment upon her, the fact that she was staring down the people who stood between her and Dawn hit her with all the subtlety of an anvil to the face. The difference between seeing her sister again and possibly never finding her could hinge upon this conversation—one in which she imagined she was supposed to maintain a cool head and not flip the table or knock skulls together.

"So, you have my sister," she blurted before she could help herself. "I want her back."

Lilah favored her with a perfectly condescending smile and laced her fingers on the table. It was a slight gesture, but one that reeked of victory all the same. Like Buffy had already forfeited something important. "Skipping the foreplay to get to the point. You're a woman after my own heart. But to be clear, Ms. Summers, we don't *have* your sister. Unless circumstances have changed, she is with your father."

"You're using her as a bargaining chip. Are you saying you can't deliver if we get you what you want?"

"No," Lilah replied, not flinching. "We *do* have the special privilege of representing Hank Summers, who was awarded full custody of Dawn Summers following your death on May 22, 2001, after she was surrendered to him by your grieving husband." She sneered a little as she said it, inclining her head in Angel's direction. "As I believe Lindsey explained to you, should you fulfill your end of the bargain,

your father would no longer be a Wolfram and Hart client and we would put every resource into the effort of not only ensuring you are able to, ahh, return from the dead, but assume guardianship over your sister."

"And if I don't..."

"Then I think it'll be very hard for you to open that little shop of yours. Dead women can't pay taxes."

"Lilah," Lindsey broke in before Buffy could do something stupid—like leap across the table and knock the bitch's teeth down her throat. "This is a friendly conversation. No need to be hostile."

"How cute. Lindsey thinks I'm being hostile." Lilah shook her head, snickering. "The fact remains that, as of right now, Mr. Summers *is* a client of Wolfram and Hart, referred to us by a trusted family friend who knew of our reputation of handling otherworldly matters. As you can imagine, it was quite the shock for Mr. Summers to discover his only living daughter was being hunted by Spike, otherwise known as William the Bloody or William Henry Pratt. A vampire known for his numerous attempts on his late daughter's life, and with a slayer fixation that he feared might extend to his youngest."

"Bollocks," Spike snarled, and Buffy snatched his wrist to still him before he did something stupid. "That git knew why I was there. Dawn bloody told him—"

But Lilah held up a hand, keeping her focus on Buffy, and continued as though the interruption hadn't occurred. "Mr. Summers was distraught—overwhelmed with grief following your death and forced suddenly to reckon with the existence of creatures he thought were fairytales. Luckily, he found his way to us, where we could take the appropriate measures to ensure he need not ever worry about his daughter losing her life to the same sort of creature that killed his eldest."

Buffy hazarded a glance at Spike just in time to see a muscle in his jaw twitch. "You found them every time," she said, turning back to the lawyer. "Spike tried to take Dawn back and you found them."

"Our resources are considerable." Lilah sniffed and picked an imaginary piece of lint off her jacket. "And, to be honest, it was fun,

watching your boy work. He'd get so close, and then—whoops—there we were. Ready to swoop in and save the day."

Spike was practically vibrating with fury now, his hands balled into tight fists. How he remained seated, Buffy didn't know, only that it took restraint with which she'd never credited him. "I oughta rip your throat out," he growled.

"Oh, do try." Lilah's smile was all dare, all bold invitation. "I think I'd like to see that. Get a demonstration of that chip in action."

Buffy jerked, releasing her hold on her vampire, not sure what she meant to do but determined to do it all the same. Then it was Spike's hand on her wrist, Spike pulling her back before she could act on the impulse to launch herself at the bitch, Spike reining her in. Buffy exhaled a long, shaky breath, looked to him, both startled and not to find his face a mask of calm. She didn't know how that happened—how they could volley back and forth like that—but she wouldn't question it. Losing her cool here was *not* an option.

"We would have been happy to let him continue," Lilah went on, addressing Buffy once more, "except it caused Mr. Summers a great deal of distress every time his daughter vanished, and after we dug into Spike's history, we determined that he was unlikely to stop trying."

"Bloody right, I wasn't. Done your homework on me, have you?"

"We make it our business to know our clients' enemies," Lilah agreed with practiced calm. "It's one of the many services provided by Wolfram and Hart."

"Look," Buffy said quickly, "my dad isn't big with the family scene. I can't imagine he would even want to keep Dawn if he knows I'm alive. Have you reached out to him at all?"

"Have we reached out to..." Lilah furrowed her brow. "Did this not come up when Lindsey visited last?"

Damn. She had screwed up. Buffy snapped her attention to Lindsey, new adrenaline jolting through her as her throat went tight. Whatever friendliness had been on his face before was gone now, replaced in equal measure with uncertainty and suspicion.

Of course. There were few questions she had that wouldn't have been asked before. She was fast losing control of this meeting, if she'd ever had it to begin with.

"We *did* discuss this, Ms. Summers," he said at length. "All of this. Your father is aware that you are back among the living, such as it is, but he is reluctant to place his youngest daughter in an environment he considers volatile."

"Volatile," she repeated, apparently unable to help herself from digging deeper. "My dad cares about *volatile*."

"Yes." Lindsey paused. "As I told you at the time, your father was concerned when he learned the circumstances regarding your death. While he is relieved to hear you're alive now, he is convinced that Dawn is safer away from...well..." He waved a hand. "All of this."

"Unless I get you the monkey's paw," Buffy said, trying to inject some authority in her voice, some confidence, hoping if she sounded like she knew what she was talking about, that would be enough. "Then you hang him out to dry or convince him that Sunnydale is a great place to ship off his daughter until the next time it's convenient for him to remember she exists. Is that how it works?"

"Are you *sure* you went over this with her, Lindsey?" Lilah asked rather pointedly. Her smile had faded as well, leaving nothing but sharp angles behind. "Are you sure it wasn't just another one of your special causes?"

"Back off, Lilah," Lindsey said shortly, his tone calm but the sentiment not.

"Clearly, you made a remarkable impression." Lilah rolled her eyes, shook her head, and met Buffy's gaze once more. "You asked why I am here. This is why. Lindsey has gotten into the bad habit of devoting company resources to pet passion projects, such as with your husband's former colleagues, with results that are counter to the firm's interests. I am here to make sure Wolfram and Hart gives up nothing without getting something in return."

In other words, to completely undermine the nature of the meeting Angel had set up. The urge to leap across the table and start negotiating with her fists was becoming harder to ignore. "So it's the paw or no deal."

"I don't like putting it in terms quite that stark, but...yes." The smile returned. "How much do you want to see your sister again, Buffy?"

Spike was on his feet the next second, his fangs descending and a snarl tearing through his throat. "You think we can't find her again, the two of us? Think you can take us both on?"

"Again, really, I'd *love* to see that chip in action," Lilah replied. "So please, attack away."

Then it was Buffy's turn to spring up, her hands shaking—all of her shaking with a combination of fear and fury. That Lilah remained seated, smiling pleasantly, only pissed her off more. More, even, when she realized that was the intention. Remain calm and remain in charge.

Buffy knew this, but it didn't help. Not when her every damn fiber screamed at her to do whatever it took to wipe that smug look off the lawyer's face.

"Angel asked Lindsey to come here so we could renegotiate," she managed to bite out. "Why show up at all if there is nothing else you want?"

Lilah shrugged. "Curiosity."

"What do you even want the paw for, anyway?"

"That is not your concern."

"Considering I know just how much damage it can do, it is very *much* my concern."

"You do?" Lindsey asked, his voice breaking through the rage fog that had settled around Buffy's head. She held his stare, that uncertainty from before resurging with a vengeance. She had screwed up again. "Well," he continued, "this is a surprise. When we spoke last, you had never heard of a monkey's paw. In fact, your only interest in it was locating it as swiftly as possible to expedite your sister's return."

"Things change," Buffy said with as much bluster as she could summon. "I'm the Slayer. It's my job to know about magic that can destroy the world. So yes, I did my research. And maybe I'm naïve, but I really don't think you would have come all the way to Sunnydale just to double down on the paw. There's something else you want."

It felt good to say, but they were just words, chosen to disguise some desperate posturing. Too obvious to escape Lilah's notice. The woman was evil—a shrewd evil. The worst kind.

"The only thing I want to know," the lawyer bitch said, "is why you care more about a piece of magical antiquity than you do your own

sister." She glanced at Lindsey. "I think this visit is going to be even more productive than Holland thought."

And that was it. Buffy saw it, felt it.

She knew.

Whether or not knowing meant anything, though, she wasn't sure, though it seemed like it did. *Should*, if nothing else. They hadn't talked about this, even flirted with the idea of giving the lawyers the truth. To Buffy, it had seemed reckless to reveal so much, even if the *how* of it wasn't obvious. Years of fighting, surviving, sizing up enemies had taught her to never underestimate the ways in which knowledge could be fashioned into weapons.

So their hand had been shown. That didn't mean she had to go quietly. Buffy straightened her shoulders, determined not to blink. "Just what the hell does that mean?"

"I mean I think you used it. I think you found the paw and decided to take a chance with it rather than deal with us." Lilah threw Lindsey another look, this one less amused. "And here I would have thought we would have recommended against that course of action. In the wrong hands, the paw can be very, very dangerous. And that's what you found out, isn't it, Ms. Summers?"

A quiet filled the air, a thick one, punctuated with heavy, deep breaths. Buffy thought, hard and fast—hard enough that her head hurt from the effort. But it was too late, and she saw that.

"Yes," she forced herself to say. "I used it."

Lilah nodded, all sanctimonious satisfaction. "Didn't work out, did it?"

Dammit. If it was all out on the table, then maybe it should *all* be out. "*I* used it," Buffy repeated, shifting her focus to Lindsey then back again. "If I was warned not to use it, I don't know. The Buffy you met with, that you struck the bargain with, isn't here."

It took a moment for the revelation to land, and she watched it happen. Watched as Lilah's eyes widened with understanding, as Lindsey's jaw dropped and the confusion on his face became comprehension. As the whole tone of the conversation veered off whatever course it had been on before. It wasn't just the lawyers, either. Angel seemed to be holding his breath, and Spike had gone

rigid. A rigid that was hard to read—reinforced by either shock or anger or both—and she hated it. Hated that feeling of disconnect, the doubt that rushed in when nothing else came, hated sitting here in the quiet she had created, not knowing and second-guessing.

Buffy breathed out. For better or worse, she'd made her call and now she'd have to live with it. It was all she could do.

"Pardon?" Lilah asked at last.

"You heard the lady," Spike said. His tone betrayed nothing, which unnerved her even more.

"I found the paw," Buffy continued, doing her damnedest to keep her voice steady. "I used it. The lights went out and when I got them back on again, I was here."

"Here as in..."

"Here. This version of reality."

Lilah looked more excited by the second, rapt and hungry. "You mean the consequences of your wishes brought you here."

"Yes." She sucked her cheeks in. "But the paw did not come along. Stayed in my reality, and the one over here is lost. Giles never had it. Believe me, I looked. It was the only way to undo what I did. I managed to track it down to the last person who had it, but he got rid of it after his own wishes came true. From what he told me, I can't say I blame him."

Another silence settled over the table—the sort full of motion and intent, the sort that became both stronger and harder to disturb the longer it stretched. Buffy wasn't sure who broke first in the end, spiraling again on her own misgivings. There was no rebagging the cat now that it was out, but that did little to calm the discomfort growing in her gut, or the way her heart betrayed her with hard thumps that felt strong enough to crack her ribcage.

When she managed to pull herself out of the tangle her thoughts had become, the lawyers were on their feet, as was Angel. Lilah looked like the canary-stuffed cat, Lindsey rather railroaded.

"This has certainly been enlightening, Ms. Summers," Lilah said. "Needless to say, you have given Wolfram and Hart a lot to think about."

"What does that mean?" Buffy demanded in a rush. "We don't have the paw. What is there to think about?"

"You don't have the paw." The lawyer repeated this in a tone that made it clear she didn't believe a word. "Perhaps not, but the circumstances aren't what they were when Lindsey first made that offer. Maybe we can do business after all."

"Like hell," Spike bit out, seething. He was studying Lilah with the intensity and hunger of a predator about to strike. "'Less you wanna cough up the kid."

"Never say never," the lawyer replied, then strode out of the room with all the poise of a visiting monarch.

And that was it. Buffy went numb, her stomach dropping, taking her heart along for the ride. What the hell had just happened? How had it gone wrong so fast? She turned to Lindsey, hoping for some indication, but all he had to offer was a bulldozed expression—one that faded into resentment the longer she watched.

For a moment, she thought he might say something to her. He didn't. Instead, he shook his head and made to follow Lilah into the foyer. He'd almost cleared the threshold when he stopped, jerking as though someone had yanked on him, then whipped around and pinned Angel with a glare. "Did you know about this?" he asked, gesturing to Buffy. "When you asked Cordelia to contact me, did you know the circumstances had changed to this degree?"

To his credit, Angel didn't blink. "Would it matter if I had?"

"It would've been nice to know, yeah," Lindsey spat. "I can't help you if I don't have all the details."

"You call what you've done helping?"

"Dammit, Angel, I didn't want to bring her along, but this kind of shit is the reason why Holland insisted."

"He didn't know," Buffy said, meeting Lindsey's gaze with steel when he turned it on her. "I didn't tell him until night before last."

Lindsey glowered at her, his jaw tight. She could tell he wanted to lash out at her, felt the weight of his restraint to keep himself reined in. "If circumstances change again," he said in a hard voice, "don't keep it from me and still expect my help."

"You haven't offered your help yet," Angel replied coolly. Why he

was antagonizing the man, Buffy couldn't fathom, but she also couldn't seem to stop it. "At least not that I heard."

The lawyer scoffed and shook his head, then turned to Buffy a final time. "Difficult as you've made my evening, I do owe you for getting this ass out of Los Angeles," he said. "Though I'm not surprised you can't stay married to him. Congrats on having lasted this long."

And without awaiting a reply, he turned and followed Lilah into the hallway. The sound of the front door swinging closed punctuated their exit.

"What a pleasant chap," Spike drawled almost at once. Buffy turned to him, her throat going tight all over again, and saw he was nearly shaking with the weight of his fury—everything he'd managed to swallow or shove back now at the surface once more. "Thanks ever so for invitin' him over, Angelus."

"Stop it," Buffy said before Angel could reply. "It's my fault. I wasn't prepared."

"Woulda been nice to know what we were hopin' to accomplish in the first place."

"*We* weren't hoping to accomplish anything," Angel shot back. "I don't remember inviting you at all."

The tension in the room had mounted past the boiling point—stoked by the lawyers and inflamed by their exit, denied a neutral outlet. Buffy couldn't stop screwing up, couldn't keep from making the wrong calls, seeing the paths she should have taken only after it was too late to go back. And this was a perfect storm—Spike's irritation with what she'd revealed, Angel's indignation that he was here at all, the impossibility of the situation itself and more than that.

Spike swelled, his eyes blazing. "I go where the lady goes. Trustin' sort, she is. Even after all this time, she thought you might be able to come through."

"Oh, shove it, Spike," Angel snapped, his jaw in firm clench mode. "I did what I could."

"Small bloody comfort knowin' you're the reason the Nibblet's lost to begin with."

"I'm not going to be lectured by the guy who's been fucking my wife for the last year."

"Someone had to do her right."

"Guys!" Buffy threw herself between them before Angel could take the swing she knew he had ready. She stared him down until he lowered his fist, then turned her glare on Spike. "Not helpful."

He shrugged, keeping his gaze locked on Angel. "Seein' as we're at your house, Slayer, I just reckoned I'd try to give you the sort of support you've come to expect here. Figured anythin' more would be too much of a shock."

There was no stopping it this time. Angel made a sound somewhere between a grunt and a cry and lunged forward hard enough that he knocked Buffy into the table, the corner catching her gut and forcing the wind out of her lungs. She heard the smack of knuckles connecting with flesh, and by the time she managed to pull herself upright, Angel had Spike on the floor and was delivering a series of blows to his face while Spike cackled like a lunatic and kept snarling insults.

"That all you got, you ponce?" He flashed a bloody grin, barely flinching when Angel's fist came smashing down again. "If you shag like you hit, no bloody wonder she came crawlin' to me."

A sound somewhere between a groan and a sob bubbled off her lips. Buffy forced herself up in time to catch Angel by the wrist before he could hit her vampire again. "This isn't helping," she said, knowing it was weak but having nothing else at the moment. Needing something.

Angel stared at her, thunderstruck. "I let him into my home, Buffy. You've been fucking this thing for over a year and I said okay, let him *into my home*."

"I know," she replied softly, and it came back. Everything from the walk and what she'd promised herself. She turned her attention to Spike in time to see him prop himself up on his elbows, grinning like a loon, looking a combination of wild and slaphappy. "Spike, please. We talked about this."

The glare he aimed at her was something between disgust and indignation. And god, she shouldn't have expected any less from him, either of them. The players were the same, but she was still very much an interloper, coming in and assuming a role in a play written for someone else.

The baggage of this relationship was still new to her, didn't belong to her, and it made every attempt to keep them civil empty. This was a Spike who had spent years shouldering the burdens of the woman he loved. Listening to her when she was pissed or sad or both, turning her righteous anger into his own, sacrificing bits of himself to give her some measure of happiness. That he wasn't with the same Buffy for whom he'd done all that didn't erase what had come before. Those feelings were still there, that hurt and resentment, and she couldn't make it go away just because she'd asked.

At length, though, the fire faded from his eyes. Spike worked his throat and nodded, and she knew he was back with her. In this moment, right here, and not lost in any of the numerous moments he'd lived with the other Buffy in which he'd been forced to hold his tongue. At least for now, however long this moment lasted until the next. "Right," he said. "Sorry, pet. Berk always brings out the worst in me."

"You do that yourself," Angel shot back.

"You do that to each other," Buffy said. She waited a beat to be certain Angel wouldn't start throwing punches again when she released him, then moved to offer her hand to Spike. "And the situation doesn't help. It's my fault too. But we can't do this now. Not if we're serious about getting Dawn back. You can go back to open hostilities once she's home."

Spike nodded, and when he tugged her to him to kiss her brow, she relaxed. Only a bit. Wondering, as she suspected she would forever, which Buffy he was with right now. Which one he saw. Not really wanting the answer, and worrying she already had it.

"Once Dawn is back," Angel said in a careful, neutral tone, "I'm leaving."

She started and turned to him, her temples beginning to pound at the emotional whiplash. "When did you decide this?"

"About ninety seconds ago," Angel replied. He flicked his gaze to Spike and back again. "It's for the best."

"Where will you go?"

"Back to LA. Not sure if there's a place for me there, but I want to try." He hesitated, then waved a hand at the door through which the

lawyers had disappeared. "It probably won't make sense, but doing this reminded me what it was like to have a purpose. I need to find one again."

"That does make sense. And I hope you do. *Once* Dawn is home." Buffy offered a smile, one that turned painful as her thoughts shifted back to the meeting. Even with the mess it had been, she found it easier to think about than the alternative. "If I didn't just screw everything up. I so didn't mean to say anything about me not being your Buffy. It just..." She glanced to Spike. "We were suddenly there, and I didn't know how to get around it."

He gave her a soft smile and ran a hand down her back. "Reckon there was no way around that."

"We could've talked more about what happened at that first meeting with Lindsey."

"Wasn't there for that one, pet." He hesitated. "Way I heard it, Angel wasn't either."

"I wasn't," Angel agreed, though there was some sulk in his voice. "Learned about it after I got home."

Buffy thought about asking him from where—her understanding was that Lindsey had dropped by in the middle of the day, which she'd learned was Angel's prime channel-surfing time. But that wasn't important, and it wasn't any of her business. "I probably told you about what Lindsey said about Dad, at least," she said to Spike. "I should have asked you after I learned he was coming so it'd be a little less obvious that I had no idea what he was talking about."

"We talked about it," he said, furrowing his brow.

"We talked about what to do with the paw—whether or not it was a good idea to hand it over. Not about things that might have come up the first time." Though some of that was her fault, too, in the way she had kicked off the conversation. True, she'd been a victim of nerves—both of the talk itself and how Angel had found her and Spike in the crypt—but that was no excuse. Nothing was where Dawn was concerned.

Buffy breathed out and looked back to Angel. "Admitting I'm not the right Buffy was a mistake."

He didn't say anything, which said everything, and she felt her spirits drop.

"We'll handle it, love," Spike assured her, squeezing her to him. "Same as we do everythin'. Find a way, you and me. We always do."

She heard it, the belief in his voice—unwavering, unshakeable, absolute—and she loved him so much for that belief. So much she didn't want to remind him of the conversation they'd had in the car the other day, when he'd said the same thing about getting the other Buffy back. When he'd been so sure the paw was the key to everything. His confidence in her never faltered, even in the face of failure.

"I hope you're right," she said instead. But she didn't think he was.

❧ 24 ❧

OH AND HOW MUCH NOW SHOULD WE PAY FOR THE PAST

She didn't realize until the crypt door swung shut behind her just how much tension she'd carried in her shoulders over the walk back. How simply being *here* made everything, even her darkest thoughts, easier to live with. Her place, as Spike had said, just as much as it was his. Somehow, the crypt had become home in a way more profound than anything she had experienced while living at Revello Drive. Perhaps because she knew this was the home she'd chosen, not one that had been selected for her, strange as it was.

At the same time, though, the crypt looked different to her than it had the last time Buffy had crossed the threshold. The past forty-eight hours and some change had been a whirlwind of sensation. She felt stretched and more than a little exhausted, the emotional peaks and valleys coming quicker now that she'd thought, she'd allowed herself to believe, the ride was slowing down. Rubicon crossed, hard part over—not where life itself was concerned, but definitely where her place in this world was. But then, she'd known—hadn't she—when she'd come to Spike after telling Angel the truth that what she wanted and what she'd get might not be the same thing.

Buffy crossed her arms, the warmth of homecoming fading away. Maybe time was all they needed to fall into rhythm, to feel like she was

living the consequences of her own life rather than someone else's. It had only been a couple of days, after all, and there was some saying about Rome and how long it had taken to build.

"Lookin' mighty pensive, pet," Spike said. He had made his way toward the kitchen nook and was fixing himself a glass of blood. "Anythin' you wanna share?"

She sighed, pushed herself off the door, and started toward him. "I'm sorry."

He arched an eyebrow but didn't look up. "Oh? What'd you do now?"

"Well, all that stuff back at the house."

"Not sure what there is to be sorry for."

She didn't, either, and that was partially the problem. But everything that had happened since Angel had busted them felt messy—like a bubble had popped. The first chance they'd had to prove this could work outside themselves, and she'd failed simply by showing up. By not being the right version of herself, even if she knew Spike would never say it. Hell, maybe he wasn't even thinking it. Maybe it was all in her head, but she didn't think so.

"I should have been more prepared," she said at last. "Considered the things that the other Buffy would have talked about when the deal was made. I just got ahead of myself."

He did look up now, brow furrowed. The confusion in his eyes was genuine.

"Dunno how you figure that," Spike replied. "Yeah, not wild that the wankers know the truth about you, but it's not like it changes anything. Story's the same, right? Just gotta piece together another way to get her back if the paw's still off the table."

"Still? You think I should put it back?"

He lifted a shoulder and looked again at the glass of blood he'd prepared. "What I would do, most like," he said. "World can go to hell in a sodding handbasket for all I care, so long as mine are protected." A beat. Spike released a slow sigh before meeting her gaze once more. "Why I'm the monster and you're the hero-type, I'd wager. Bugger the rest."

"We're not giving them—"

"I know we're not. Not that thick, pet. Just don't fancy pretendin' that it's not what I want to do."

"Even with everything the paw has done—taken from you."

She expected him to argue, say it hadn't taken a thing, and wasn't sure how to react when he didn't. Wasn't sure how to feel about it, either.

"Not a thing to do about it, is there?" Spike replied at last. "'Cept cut our bloody losses, let it be someone else's problem."

Buffy inhaled and looked away, her sinuses suddenly aflame, her chest growing tight. "So—"

The air rang with the sound of glass meeting stone—not hard enough to break, but more than enough to grab her attention. "Not like that," he barked. "Get it outta your head, Slayer."

"Get what out of my head?"

"That anythin' I said meant you were a problem." His eyes were doing the flashy thing they did whenever he was angry. "That's somethin' you'll never hear from me."

"Doesn't mean it's not true."

"Bloody hell, woman. Need to have this talk on the regular, then?"

Buffy sighed again and shook her head, not knowing what she meant. Only things that had seemed clear and good and *hers* before Angel had brought the real world to their doorstep were suddenly in question again. Not because of a single thing said or done, but the sum of it. Her ineptitude at being herself here, even though she had been born for the role. A handful of months was all that separated this moment from the time she'd thrown a sword at a lippy watcher just for interrupting her, and she'd gone into that meeting cold as well. Certain that she had the bargaining chip—knowing she *did* and also knowing that made her powerful. It should have been like that today, but that version of herself seemed almost further out of reach than the Buffy who was supposed to live here. No, *definitely* further out of reach, as at least this world's Buffy had left a mark.

True, Wolfram and Hart had a chip of their own—and she wanted Dawn more than they wanted the paw, which made the comparison less cut and dried, but only to a limit. Buffy had never let herself be cowed before, and knowing that was what had

happened today stung like little else could. Made her doubt everything.

And that was it—the doubt. Spike had told her the memories were the thing, not the person. That was what he had realized after she'd confessed she loved him. She was entirely Buffy, just a Buffy who had a different recollection of how they had come together. As though they were living in a soap opera and she was the character who had been conked on the head—not an entirely separate person who had, up until a few days ago, been living an entirely separate life. This approach had been such a comfort to her, and she'd wanted to believe it, believe it as she believed Spike believed it. However, that had been too simple, and this situation was anything but.

"Buffy."

She looked up and found him watching her, his head tilted and his eyes soft.

"We'll figure it out," he said. "All this with Dawn—whatever it takes, yeah? Never once got the witches involved whenever I was after her. Wasn't needed at first, though I had it in mind after the lawyer gits worked their own mojo and I lost the trail. Except then..."

"Then I was back from the dead."

He nodded, offering a small smile. "Have a way of becomin' all a bloke sees when you enter a room."

And then he wouldn't have left—would have put the search for Dawn on hold as they attempted to navigate what her resurrection meant, amid the night terrors and the demon she'd brought back with her. Then there had been Angel's return to town—after having blown all his cash—and Giles's death and funeral, boxing up the shop. She would have barely had any time to breathe before the lawyer arrived with the carrot that was a simple trade—Dawn for the paw.

Going to Willow and Tara with this was the next logical step. Even if they couldn't work the magic to undo whatever Wolfram and Hart had done to conceal her sister, they should be able to at least point them in the right direction.

After all, what was a cross-country manhunt to a couple of witches who had raised the dead?

"Right," Buffy said. Then winced. "Though, in case you didn't notice, Willow and I aren't exactly vibing."

He shrugged. "Bit what we talked about before, yeah? Said things were complicated, but you haven't exactly spent a load of time with any of them since everythin' came down, have you? Reckon they just need to see you're still Buffy. Hard to do that when you spend every minute hidin' out here."

That was a fair point, but it also supposed that the others were open to considering the situation the way Spike did. Could be a mighty tall order. Still, she had to think that, even if everything with her friends was never again the way it had been, Willow and Tara would do whatever they could to recover Dawn. They would know—had to know—how important that was.

As for the rest of it, her general sense of displacement—maybe all she needed to do was carve a path that hadn't already been started by a different version of herself. Finding the paw and striking a bargain had been the approach of this world's Buffy. And it had been worth exploring, even if this was as far as they got.

When Buffy snapped back to herself this time, it was to find Spike was close enough to touch. She hadn't even heard him move.

"Dunno about you, love, but after all that, wouldn't mind catchin' a spot of violence." He grinned, tilted her head back. "Nighttime stroll sound all right to you?"

She hesitated, wondering if it was wise to let him distract her when there was so much to work through still. With her mind full of renewed doubts and insecurities, with the world around her not as balanced as it had been before he'd swept her up the first time. Her hesitation, however, only lasted as long as it took the thought of talking about all of this to exhaust her, and she realized she was tapped for the day. There would be no solving of every Buffy crisis in one conversation, one day, one week—hell, she might be working through her identity issues for the next year or more, fun as that sounded. All she could do was push forward bit by bit every day and hope that tomorrow was better for it.

"Nighttime stroll?" she said a moment later. "In this neighborhood? Could be dangerous."

"If we're lucky."

Buffy quirked an eyebrow and slid her hands up his chest. "Lucky, huh? That also something you're looking to get?"

He grinned, pulled a kiss off her lips. "Think I forgot that we were interrupted earlier? Just don't fancy you worryin' about your sacred duty while you have my tongue in your puss."

Heat suffused her cheeks, her mind providing her the visual. If she had learned anything over the past couple of days, it was just how much Spike enjoyed spending time with his face between her legs. How he would grin up at her at whatever sound she made, lips shining and eyes dancing, right before he muttered something particularly filthy and sank his fingers inside of her. Or growl when she tightened her grip on his hair to rub herself along his mouth, attempt to direct that devilish tongue of his where she wanted it the most.

She wasn't embarrassed—not anymore, at least, though the occasional period of shyness would strike her at the oddest times. It was more that reveling in pleasure was new for her, physical decadence being something she hadn't been encouraged to pursue in the past, her life and body being instruments of destruction rather than anything sensual. And the best part about it was, when he was bringing her to life with his lips, fingers, and tongue, her mind was far away, along with her problems. Something for future Buffy to worry about. Sensual Buffy was all about the present.

"I think," she said, lifting herself up so she could kiss him again, "that sounds like an excellent idea."

Spike nodded, then did that slow drag of his tongue over his teeth. "Let's hurry then. Got lots I want to do to you."

And that sounded excellent, too.

BUFFY DIDN'T FALL asleep that night—she crashed into it. One moment gasping and clawing at her vampire as he whispered dirty things into her skin and pounded into her with his cock, and the next in a blessedly heavy black. And she wondered, as she began to stir late the following afternoon, if that hadn't been his intention. Work her to

a place of physical exhaustion that matched her mental exhaustion so that when sleep did come, her brain was too tired to chase her into dreams.

The previous day, she had finally gotten to take advantage of Spike's drowsy morning grinding, and that had been a treat as well. Waking up with him pressing kisses along the back of her neck, teasing the head of his cock along her slit from behind before finally sinking inside of her with a long, throaty groan. Then he'd nipped at her ear, whispering how much he'd missed this too—missed the privilege of feeling her pussy around him first thing, and how good it was to have it again. Have *her* again. How this was how it would be every day from here on out.

It certainly made waking up without a round of enthusiastic love-making a bit of a downer. Buffy grumbled and turned over, reached out to blindly feel the space beside her and found it was missing a certain vampire.

"Spike?" She sat up, holding the sheet to her chest. Not sure why, except waking up alone always had a way of making her feel vulnerable. Too many bad experiences to count.

"Here, love," he replied.

Buffy twisted toward his voice, breathing out when their eyes met. He was sitting on the ground along the wall by the ladder, dressed only in jeans, a cigarette dangling from one hand, the other resting on a small box he had in his lap. It took a moment or two of blatant ogling before she realized what it was, and when she did, something in her chest gave a hard, violent twist. And again when it occurred to her that the reason his voice sounded rough was that he'd been crying.

She breathed out, still staring at the keepsake box as though she could will it to turn into something else, but that wasn't the way the world worked. Somehow she had forgotten about it, though in the wake of everything that had happened since that awful morning at the house, perhaps that much was to be expected. What was a collection of private love notes—Benedick to Beatrice—that this world's Buffy had kept in the stand beside her bed?

At length, she forced herself to trail her gaze up his chest until she

tumbled into his endless blue. And what she saw there made her shatter all over again.

Somehow, Buffy managed to swallow around the tightness in her throat and forced out the question she didn't want answered. "Do you want me to go?"

The question seemed to take him by surprise. He frowned, genuine confusion filling his eyes, chasing the sadness away. "'Course I don't. Never want you to be anywhere but with me, love."

Buffy looked to the box again, and this time he did too, blinking at it as though only then realizing it was there.

After a stretch, he sighed and nodded. "Right. Found a note from you tucked in the sheets. Used to read them there on the nights when... Just a way of makin' it feel like you were here when you had to be with him." A beat. He stuck the cigarette back between his lips and took a hard pull, one *she* could nearly feel in her own damn lungs. "Not sure how long it'd been there. How we mighta missed it. Then I remembered..." He glanced down again, ran his free hand over the keepsake box's smooth lid. "Didn't really let myself think about it then. That you kept them. Every one of them."

"I didn't."

Spike furrowed his brow. "What?"

"I didn't...keep them." God, this was tough. Buffy blinked and looked away, her breaths coming harder, her heart skipping the way it did when she was deep in battle. She hadn't intended to say that—say anything, really, but the words had just been there, ready and within reach. Every thought that had nipped at her on the way home last night came surging forward all over again, bringing with them that sense of otherness she couldn't seem to shake.

"You keep doing that," she went on a moment later, her voice a little wobbly. "Talking about the other Buffy as though she's me. She's not, Spike. I never wrote you letters. I never kept them in a box by my bed. I'm the one who—"

"Stop it."

"I made wishes. Wishes that brought me here, sent *that* Buffy away. I didn't know I loved you until a couple of nights ago. Before then, I was—"

"You think I've got the two of you screwed up, is that it?" He was on his feet in a blink, the box tumbling to the stone floor. "Don't remember all that?"

"No, I think you do." It was becoming more difficult to force out the words—hell, to find them in the first place. "I think you remember and you're heartbroken. I think that it's easier to think about what I cost you if you can pretend we're the same person. That I *am* who did all those things you remember."

"Rot."

"Spike—"

"Dunno if I've been clear on the subject," he said in a low growl, "but I'm a sucker for you. Always. No matter what, you hear? Thought we'd already had this out. Couple times now, by my count. Will say it till you're old and gray if that's what it takes. I can be happy about havin' this chance with you and miss what we had before."

Buffy nodded, pressing her lips together, trying to keep back the cry that wanted to tumble free. "But you keep talking like I *am* her."

"You're Buffy, same as her."

"But it wasn't enough before. It wasn't. Then you decided it was."

"Right, when you were just throwin' yourself at me hopin' I'd take a nibble because I happen to love you more than life itself. Wasn't enough when you were tryin' to use me 'cause you thought you could." Spike stomped over to the bed, his steps hard enough she would have sworn the whole crypt shook. "I'm the one without a soul, Slayer. Do I really need to explain why my answer changed?"

She wanted to stop—wanted to rewind to the moment she'd woken up and keep herself from turning over and seeing him as she had. Slap a hand over her mouth, or maybe duct-tape the damn thing shut. But it seemed she just couldn't help herself. "No. I know why it changed," she said. "It changed because you know you can't get her back. This is it now."

A hard roar ripped through his throat. He tore away from her, prowled back to the wall and smashed his fist against it with a deafening *crack*. It all happened fast but she caught every motion, every line in his face, the pull of his mouth, the way his lips curled up as his knuckles collided with rock. Then the ripple from that strike, the

cracks that spiderwebbed from the point of contact, bits of stone that rocketed back in an explosion of dust. And then she was up, not realizing that she'd moved until the shock of cold hit her bare skin. Not sure what she intended to do, but knowing she needed to be on her feet to do it.

Then everything went still again. Spike standing with his back to her, panting, his still-smoking cigarette dangling from the hand he hadn't just launched into the wall, his shoulders slumped, Buffy across the room, heaving breaths that made her lungs hurt, weighed equally with regret and stubborn righteousness. Firm in the belief that she was right and hating it all the same, hating what that meant while also not knowing what it meant—if she was expecting too much too fast, or fooling herself for expecting anything at all. Perhaps there never had been a chance with him here. Perhaps they had been stupid to try.

The thought was pain itself.

"Can't win here, can I?"

Buffy blinked, that awful, telling burn flaring up behind her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Been tellin' you I love you since you got here, Slayer. 'Cause you're Buffy."

"But I'm not your Buffy."

"Why not?" He turned now, and the look on his face broke what was left of her heart. "Why aren't you my Buffy?"

"I... You know why."

"You're here, aren't you? You love me."

She nodded, drawing in a deep, rattling breath. "I do. Spike—"

"And I love you. So you're mine. And I'm yours. Simple as can be."

"But it's not simple," Buffy shot back, louder than she intended, but maybe that was a good thing. Maybe it meant he'd hear her. "This isn't like...Drusilla or Angel or just a person you used to love. I told you I don't want to be a replacement and you keep talking about me like I'm her."

His eyes had hardened once more. "Ever consider, Slayer, that's because you *are* her where it counts?"

"That's not—"

"And it's not like you haven't done your share—talkin' about rot the

other bloke did on your side. Things you say *I* did that I don't remember. Ever once hear me complain?"

Well, that somewhat stole the wind from her sails. Buffy licked her lips. "If I did, I didn't mean to."

"And I don't bloody mean to, either. Wanna punish me for it? Drive me outta my skull?" He stared at her for a moment, then broke off with a huff. "You think I can't separate the two of you—that I'm mixin' you up. Care to tell me, then, why I can't stop thinkin' about her? Where she is, if she's anywhere at all? If she'd understand how I can love her so much and love you at the same time 'cause you're the same bloody woman? If she'd hate me now, think it was somethin' other than what it was for me? If she'd get that the idea of livin' in a world without her is somethin' I just can't do again?"

"Spike—"

"You want me to bloody bury her? Pretend it didn't happen? Tuck it all away like it was nothin'? Like she's not the reason we're here at all?"

She forced out a slow breath. They were back to referring to this world's Buffy as a separate entity, at least. Though in classic form, she wasn't sure she liked that, either.

"Is that what you want?" he demanded again. "What would make you happy?"

"No. *No*." A pause. Then, because she couldn't help herself, she had to ask, "If it were, would you do it?"

The question seemed to throw him. He worked his throat, holding her gaze. "Not much in this world I wouldn't do for you, love. But no. Never. Could never let go of what we had then."

Buffy nodded, let the words and their sentiment settle. Trying to figure out if she could prize apart the confluent emotions and feelings, if she was sad or relieved, tired or ashamed, knowing the answer was probably somewhere in the middle. Things had been clearer before the talk with the lawyers—not necessarily neat and tidy, but she'd been able to believe that moving forward wouldn't be as complicated as it seemed now. She and Spike were both driven by their passions, at times blinded by them. Once she'd learned she was stuck here, that knowledge had combined forces with the understanding that she was in love with him and even though she hadn't been optimistic enough to

think that Spike would embrace her, the hope had been there all the same. So much so she'd let it overshadow her own misgivings regarding the other Buffy and the crater-sized hole she'd left behind. And Spike hadn't helped matters—he'd had all the right words, and she believed that he'd believed them. Probably still did.

"Maybe we did this too fast," Buffy said, moving back to the bed. Suddenly, she found she needed to sit.

Spike looked up sharply. "Did what too fast?"

"Jumping into things, you and me."

"You think so?"

"Spike, you learned the other Buffy was never coming back and that I love you on the same night." She gripped the edge of the mattress to anchor herself. "You didn't have time to process what her being gone means."

"And that means, what, you shouldn't be here?

"Maybe I took advantage of you."

"Fairly certain I'm the one who went for the snog, Slayer." He offered a flat grin that had zero humor behind it. "Reckon the answer's somewhere in the middle."

"What's the middle?"

"You bein' her and not bein' her at the same time." Spike tilted his head, brought the cigarette to his lips one last time before snuffing it out on the stone beside him. "You wishin' you had those memories of us, same as I do. Thinkin' I view this as somethin' less than what we had before."

She inhaled sharply, her eyes starting to sting. "Don't you?"

"Bite your tongue."

"You had a whole year with her before. With me... It's just been a couple of days, and I did something horrible to you."

"You on that again?"

God, he could be so frustrating at times. Buffy huffed and looked away, not trusting herself to do or say the right thing when all she wanted to do was scream at him for being flippant. Or launch herself at him and beg him to forget this entire conversation.

"Not like I have a load of experience, is it?" Spike continued a second later. "First time the woman I love swapped spots with herself.

I've given it to you straight, been doin' that from the start. You're Buffy. I love Buffy. Means I love you."

"But—"

"Tell you this, though." He waited until he had her eyes again. "You're never shaking me. Fancy pullin' a runner now, go right ahead. I'll find you. I'll keep finding you. However many times it takes. However many times I gotta say it before it gets through your thick skull." Spike held her gaze a moment longer, then glanced down. "You're not one or the other to me. It's all of you. You're here but you're also out there somewhere. Havin' you here doesn't make it easy to forget the part of you that's not. Can't make me not worry where she is. If she's all right. Bloody hope she's happy. If she managed to end up where you started out, reckon she might have a chance of that."

Buffy held her breath. "You want that."

"Yeah."

"Even if it's...happy with someone else."

"Told you this once already, too. Someone else bein' me—"

"You but not you. Can you tell me that doesn't hurt?"

For a second, she thought he would. Caught the glint of challenge in his eyes, that defiance that seemed to define him, saw how desperately he wanted to tell her he could live out the rest of his days just fine if knew that the Buffy he'd fallen in love with was somewhere else. Living in some other world with some other version of him—that as long as she was happy, he could be happy. That the thought wasn't painful at all.

But the second passed, and she saw that too. The moment he realized the answer wasn't quite so simple or obvious, and for the way his face fell, she almost hated herself for asking. For making him realize this about her and himself.

Spike blew out a breath, seeming to deflate with it. Then, at last, he said, "No."

Buffy's lower lip began to tremble, and she knew she was seconds from losing it completely. It wasn't fair—none of this was fair. What she was asking of him now, what she wanted him to say, what she wanted to be true, and she didn't know how to move forward. If forward was even possible. If she was being an idiot for thinking these

things at all, wanting what she wanted, all that she wanted. Splitting apart who was Buffy and who wasn't, that she could exist in two—and apparently more—universes concurrently and still be the same person.

But the thing was, when she wondered how Spike might react if things were to flip—if he could have his Buffy back—she didn't imagine him pining for her after she left. Waking up and getting out of bed to mull over the things they had shared together, and it was selfish of her to want that now. To expect it when she was just a few days into this relationship versus the year he'd had with the other Buffy. Give them more time and the answer might change but she didn't know, and not knowing was terrifying.

Not nearly as terrifying as the prospect of walking away, though, which she did not want to do. Especially since she knew there were more days ahead like the one they had spent lazing in bed and making love in the shower. She just needed to ask herself if she could live with her own uncertainty on the promise that perhaps it wouldn't be so absolute some point down the line.

The telltale whine of the crypt door opening sliced through the silence that had encompassed them, somewhat muffled being a floor above but immediately recognizable all the same. As one, Buffy and Spike looked at each other, then exploded into motion. He scooped up the clothes he had peeled off her the night before and tossed them onto the mattress; she found his T-shirt bunched up under her pillow and chucked it at his head. Shoes and boots were located and thrown with precision. When Buffy joined him at the base of the ladder, Spike greeted her by pressing a blade into her palm, waiting until she closed her hand around it, then moved up without a word.

Buffy didn't know what she expected when she climbed out of the hatch, and she couldn't see much as Spike hadn't been up yet to light any candles or switch on one of the lamps. Yet when she pulled herself to her feet and blinked, what she could make out didn't make any sense.

"What the sodding hell are you doing here?" Spike snarled beside her.

"Is that any way to greet a guest?"

The voice had Buffy's spine going ramrod straight. She fixed her

glare on the figure moving in the shadows, and sure enough, the woman was tall and willowy. Only decidedly not Willow.

"Angel told me this was where I might find you," Lilah Morgan said. "After our conversation, I conferred with Holland Manners, updated him on your situation, and we discussed the possibility of an alternate arrangement. Since the circumstances have changed, it only seemed fitting that we reevaluate what we can offer you."

Buffy crossed her arms. Hard to do while holding a knife, but she'd had a lot of practice. "My situation? What situation is that?"

"Dimensional displacement," she replied, direct and unwavering. "Turns out you're in luck, Ms. Summers. Wolfram and Hart is prepared to make you a deal. One that will send you home."

25

ALL THE UNTESTED VIRTUE, THE THINGS I SAID I'D NEVER DO

"WHAT?"

It didn't take long for Buffy's eyes to adjust to the dark, all things considered. In seconds, she could make out every falsely polite bat of Lilah Morgan's eyelashes, which revived her visceral, gut-level dislike. The urge was there to storm forward, seize the lawyer by the collar, and toss her polished ass outside, but Buffy managed to stay rooted to the spot, focused instead on the impossible thing she had just heard.

"I said we can send you home," Lilah repeated, shifting a step forward. Her pointed heels clicked on the concrete floor. "Assuming that is something you're interested in."

Buffy swallowed, hating how her body betrayed her. She was fairly certain Lilah was human and equally certain the bitch could hear her heart thundering anyway. Spike sure as hell could, though she didn't know how to read the look he sent her or the rigidity that had commanded him. And she realized something she should have known from the start—that this quality of his, the ability to close down and become unreadable to her, was singular to this version of Spike. The one in her world was a freaking mood ring, always open, always baring his whole self to her, whether she wanted it or not.

This Spike probably only revealed himself like that around one person, and that person wasn't here.

"What about the other Buffy?" she heard herself ask.

"What about her?"

A low snarl rumbled through Spike's throat, one that earned a grin from the evil lawyer lady.

"What an odd little love triangle you three have going on," she said, not bothering to hide her amusement. "We are prepared to offer you a *complete* reset, Ms. Summers. One that will put everyone back where they belong, no harm, no foul." She paused, then inclined her head toward Spike. "So your girlfriend would come home. All in one piece."

Her temples began to pound. "You know where she is?"

"You mean you don't?" Lilah shifted her gaze between the two of them. "She's in your world, Ms. Summers. And apparently, she's quite eager to come home."

The shift was sudden and dramatic. A sound that was somewhere between a whimper and a growl, the cry of a wounded animal, tumbled through Spike's lips. "She is?"

And that was all it took for it to cement for her. The fragility in his voice, the pain and the hope, the love. Buffy's heart plummeted, shattering and mending at the same time, everything becoming clear as she hadn't wanted it to be. The conversation they had left downstairs had already been one she'd thought likely to haunt her forever, but speculation had hardened into knowledge, and there was no going back.

Whatever the offer was, she would take it. Spike deserved to live with his Buffy. His Buffy deserved to come home. And Buffy deserved to be no one's second choice.

Lilah nodded, the seemingly permanent sneer on her face fading a bit. "One of the benefits of working with Wolfram and Hart. As a body, we are interdimensional. Incarnations of Wolfram and Hart exist in every known plane of reality, and we do a good job of keeping connected. You know the saying, if a butterfly flaps its wings, et cetera, et cetera? On occasion, that flap has repercussions beyond the reality it is contained in. We like to keep tabs on the big picture."

"And you know which one is mine?" Buffy asked. Now that the door had been opened, a thousand questions were pushing at the

corners of her mind. "We tried that—my friend Willow did. She does magic and there were too many. Worlds, I mean, that look like this one and the one I came from. Finding the right one—"

"We know which one."

"*How?*"

Lilah stared at her, her brow furrowing. "Did you not hear what I just said? Interdimensional? Butterfly wings?"

"So, what, something *flapped* on that side and you just happened to be paying attention?"

"No," the lawyer replied, drawing the word out. "Ms. Summers reached out to Wolfram and Hart herself."

"She what?" Spike staggered forward like he meant to seize the woman by the arm but caught himself before he could get too close. He stood still then, breathing hard, glanced at Buffy and back again. "Offered to cut a deal with you, is that it? Your lot got the sodding paw that way?"

"I believe that was her intention, yes. That was before she realized she wasn't in her world." Now Lilah dragged her gaze down Spike's body, all female appreciation. "You must be quite the stud in the sack. As I understand it, she's getting the fuzzy end of the reality lollipop by returning. Seems the Spike over there just won't cut it."

The snarl was back, this time brimming with enough intent that Buffy knew he would take a swing at the lawyer if he got near enough. She acted on instinct, seized him by the wrist and dragged him back before he could close the distance separating them. "Don't," she whispered furiously, knowing and uncaring that her voice carried. Then, to Lilah, she spat, "Anyone ever tell you that you need to work on your people skills?"

Lilah just smirked. "Not needed when I know I'm going to get what I want."

"Yeah?" Buffy shot back. "I haven't said yes yet."

"You will, though. You would be stupid not to. I haven't told you the best part yet." She stopped short, her eyes practically shimmering, and like the day before, Buffy wanted to knock her teeth down her throat so badly the want seemed to have its own taste and texture. "It turns out there *is* something Wolfram and Hart wants more than that

monkey's paw. Something we didn't realize was on the table until our little meeting. So we are prepared not only to offer you an express ticket to your reality, but to ensure that Dawn Summers—that's the one in this world—comes home."

A jolt of pure fear rocked through her body. Not at the thought of Dawn coming home—that made her heart leap—but at the dead certainty that whatever they were going to ask for would break her. That she had been wrong just a second ago, that the price would be too much, and she would have to, *have* to say no. Stay here and live with the echoes of Spike's mangled hope ringing in her ears for the rest of her life, suffocating on the cancerous jealousy she harbored for herself. And she wondered in the beats between breaths if that hadn't been Lilah's intention all along. She seemed like the sort of person who enjoyed drinking the pain of others.

But still, she couldn't not know. So Buffy exhaled shakily and forced herself to ask. "What?"

"Oh, nothing you have," Lilah replied almost at once, waving a hand as though the whole matter were of no consequence. "And that deal has already been made."

Oh god, how?

"What. Deal?" she demanded.

"The one we made with Angel."

Her ears began to ring, the sound low and dull, as her insides flushed with both dread and anger. Angel had cut a deal with these creeps without telling her. Maybe she shouldn't have been surprised but she was. Despite the situation, despite everything that he had learned, she'd thought—*trusted*—that they were on the same team.

God, how stupid could she be?

"What deal?" she managed to bite out.

"Oh, he didn't tell you?" Though it was clear this wasn't news. Lilah said Angel had directed her where to go, which meant she'd probably come straight here from whatever agreement they'd made. "Turns out suburban living isn't for Angel after all. Wolfram and Hart had plans for him—big plans that were waylaid by that pesky Mohra demon. When we discovered that his reason for remaining human was...well, otherwise fixated"—she grinned again and gestured at

Spike—"we thought he might be open to helping us fulfill some of those plans."

"What the—" But Buffy stopped short, her mind slingshotting her back a few nights. The night Spike had told her the way things were in this world, back before she'd accepted that the monkey's paw wish hadn't changed Angel at all. She'd come home, found him upstairs polishing his gun, and pushed him into giving her answers. Hoping he'd contradict what Spike had told her, instead standing there as he'd discussed their relationship as he saw it. Including a thought he'd had after her death—one he'd admitted he hadn't stopped having.

She'd asked him if he still wanted it—if the temptation was still there. He'd told her he was waiting for her to decide what she wanted out of their marriage. Or if she just plain wanted *out*.

If it was the Mohra demon that had curbed the plans Wolfram and Hart had for Angel, then...

"He's going back," she said, looking at Spike, who was still glaring hard at the lawyer, his jaw pulled tight. "He's becoming a vampire again."

"Ding ding." Lilah nodded, all smug satisfaction.

She had to be missing something—not seeing the obvious. There had to be more to it.

"What else is he doing? What's the catch?" Buffy asked. "He wouldn't agree to anything he thought might help you."

"There is no catch, Ms. Summers. I imagine he'll go back to the way things were before your little whirlwind romance. That's exactly where we want him—where we've always wanted him."

"And he knows about these plans you have for him?"

"Oh yes."

"And...because he agreed, you're giving Dawn back to us."

"And reinstating you as a living resident of Sunnydale, California." Lilah sniffed. "Angel was very insistent on that."

Angel was insistent. *Insistent.*

There was something else to this—there had to be. Something she wasn't seeing. No matter how angry Angel had been with her, no matter the reasons why their marriage had fallen apart, signing

anything Wolfram and Hart proposed was beyond reckless. *He'd* told her so and he hadn't been lying. She knew he hadn't.

Angel had been considering becoming a vampire again from the start. What prompted him to pull the trigger? What wasn't she seeing?

Buffy glanced down, her eyes catching on the tips of her shoes, and that was it. A bomb went off in her head and she understood.

She had prompted him to pull the trigger. Of course she had. Things the other night had been murky and undefined. They weren't anymore—Angel himself had said as much after he'd seen the crypt, with its Buffy-influenced interior decorating to complement the truth that was her relationship with Spike. He was going back to Los Angeles as he'd said. Whether or not he'd firmly decided to return to being a vampire when he'd told her about the move, she didn't know. And it didn't matter.

The lawyers thought they knew everything—and to their credit, they knew a lot—but they didn't know Angel. Not as well as they thought they did, anyway. They'd come to him to strike a bargain, believing they were getting something when they weren't—nothing they wouldn't have gotten, anyway. All that power and insight and bluster, and Lilah had walked in and handed Angel a huge amount of leverage he hadn't hesitated to put to use.

That had to be it. It made sense, and nothing else did.

"And what is it you want from me?" Buffy forced herself to ask.

"Finally, a relevant question," Lilah replied. "It's quite simple, Ms. Summers. We would like you to sign a legally and magically binding document that will ensure you never have children."

"The fuck?" Spike rasped. Which summed up her thoughts rather succinctly.

"As I said, it's simple," the lawyer went on, though she looked amused again. "Ms. Summers signs an agreement with Wolfram and Hart forgoing her ability to have children. In exchange, we send her back to her world and bring back the Buffy Summers that lives here."

She said it like it was nothing. But it wasn't nothing. It was the sort of bargaining chip Buffy saw in movies—a deal one might make at a crossroads. A concept itself too big to break down because it wasn't a thing at all, not something she could hold and touch and hand over. All

Wolfram and Hart wanted was a piece of herself, a fundamental building block of Buffy, whether or not she'd ever intended to put it to use, something that was inherently hers.

And Buffy was suddenly terrified. Absolutely and completely, seized by a different kind of fear, one startlingly dissimilar from any she'd ever experienced. She didn't know why, either. She was a woman who had twice died, who had twice come to terms with death, who had propped a gun under her chin just a few days ago to make it an even three. The ask alone wasn't what did it—that she would ever have children had become a moot point. Something she might have wanted once and didn't want anymore—only she just realized that now because it hadn't been even remotely close to a thought she'd entertained at all since her resurrection. Worry about Dawn, this constant pang and never-ebbing fear was something she didn't want any more of—not on top of everything else. Plus, with a vampire partner, children were kind of a nonstarter.

That wasn't the scary part. That it would be part of her—a piece of Buffy broken off and put on the auction block—didn't scare her either. In many ways, she felt that had been her reality since the resurrection itself. She'd been tasked to rebuild Buffy Summers, one essential component at a time. Only she'd had to find all the parts, scattered as they had been after the fall, and even now she still had a long way to go before the job was done. Not picking up the part that might have one day been a mother didn't infuse her with anything. It was actually kind of a relief. One less thing to worry about in a world overfull with monsters.

No, the scary part was the why. Why it would even be a consideration, why a law firm would give a crap, what was in it for them. That they wanted that piece made her jolt with the urge to snatch it up and hold it close to her chest like a toy a child had forgotten but refused to share. As a result, Buffy's mind was somehow both quiet and riotous, screaming loudly, but screaming nothing, and she had no idea what to think.

She didn't know how long she stood there, paralyzed with possibility, but after a moment, she returned to herself and managed to

swallow around the mess in her throat. "Why?" she asked, her voice sharp against the surrounding silence.

Lilah sighed and rolled her eyes. "Why? You go quiet for a half-hour and that's the best you can come up with?"

"If Wolfram and Hart doesn't want me to have children, there has to be a reason."

"Never mind that. Do *you* want children, Ms. Summers? With all that world-saving you do on the regular? Here I thought—"

"Why?"

There must have been something in her voice this time, for Lilah snapped her mouth shut and gave her a considering sort of look. "Fine," she said, the word coming out half-growl. "There are a number of prophecies Wolfram and Hart are committed to seeing fulfilled. Others, we want stopped. You're familiar with prophecies, I gather."

Buffy crossed her arms and glared her response.

"Many prophecies are DOA," Lilah continued. "Others come true in ways we don't anticipate. Such as one involving Angel."

"Angel?"

"The Shanshu Prophecy—vampire with the soul plays a major role in Armageddon and becomes human." The lawyer lifted a shoulder. "The prophecy is vague regarding what side the vampire is on, but given that your husband currently has a heartbeat and a pulse, we believe it is possible that prophecy was fulfilled and the Mohra demon was just a means to an end. After all, word is he *did* play a role in what could have been Armageddon, easily, had you not sent him to Hell. It's vague but not out of the question."

Buffy still said nothing, though a tremble had taken residence in her body. The thought that Angel's turning human had been something of prophecy was, like what Wolfram and Hart wanted from her, a bit too big for her brain to tackle at the moment. What that meant for him and his new plans to revert to form.

"There are also numerous prophecies involving the Slayer," Lilah said. "As you know from experience. One speaks of a slayer who just can't seem to stay dead, and how she and her children wage a hundred-year war on Wolfram and Hart, which eventually leads to our demise."

She looked down, sucked in her cheeks. "As you might imagine, we have a vested interest in that *not* happening."

Buffy breathed out, her ears starting to ring again, louder and more terrible than before. "But that can't be me," she blurted, fixating on that piece of knowledge. It couldn't be her for a damn good reason that everyone seemed to have overlooked. "A hundred-year war?"

"That might be metaphorical."

"*Might* be?"

"Well, we don't know exactly." Lilah raised her gaze slowly, no hint of a smile now, which made her look more menacing. Made what she was saying sound less insane. "There is some debate on what it means that the slayer in the prophecy can't stay dead. It could refer to the fact that your friends have boundary issues and resurrected you not only in this world but countless others. It could also be a consequence of the resurrection spell itself."

"Meaning?" Buffy demanded, her voice reaching a shrill.

"Wolfram and Hart has dealt in resurrection magic before—yours was atypical. Performed by amateurs. Successfully," Lilah added, this time with a shadow of her former smirk. "As is obvious. You're standing right here. But the fact that it was atypical means we likely won't know the repercussions of that spell for a long, long time."

God, she couldn't hear anymore. One more revelation like that and she'd lose her mind. Buffy shook her head, stepping back, back, until she crashed against something solid. *Spike*. He gripped her upper arms, digging his fingers into her skin as though he knew she needed it. Needed an anchor to hold her here before she floated off again.

"If it makes you feel better, there's every chance that signing away your ability to have children would ensure that you are not the subject of the prophecy," Lilah said. She sounded strange—like she was trying on empathy for the first time and didn't know how to wear it. "In that case, you have lost nothing. Well, almost nothing. If you like kids, I guess there might be some seller's remorse. Me? I never saw the appeal."

Spike huffed. "Right loss, that is. You're so maternal."

The lawyer snickered her appreciation, then shifted her attention back to Buffy. "So, what do you say? Ready to go home?"

Buffy didn't respond, couldn't. None of what Lilah had said had done a damn thing to quiet the noise in her head or make the heart of what she was offering feel real. Nearly every minute Buffy had spent in this world since making those wishes had been in an effort to undo them. All of them up until two nights ago when she'd forced herself to make peace with the idea that she wasn't going anywhere—that this was her world now. That someone would walk up to her with a ready-made solution was a bit too fantastical to accept at face value, no matter what they wanted in return.

"I need a minute," she said, not aware she intended to speak until the words were out. She edged a step away from Spike to catch his gaze. "We need to talk."

The look he met her with was another one of the unreadable sort. But he wasn't telling her not to—he wasn't saying no right now, encouraging her to bodily escort the lawyer lady out of the crypt in the way he couldn't courtesy of the chip. That meant something too.

"Take all the time you need." Lilah glanced at her surroundings, wrinkling her nose. "I'll just...make myself what passes for comfortable in a place like this."

That she would stay until a decision had been reached spoke to her confidence in the answer. Buffy didn't know what to think about that, nor the fact that neither she nor Spike thought to argue. Rather, when she started toward the hatch that led downstairs, he was there at her side. Waiting for her to descend first, then slipping onto the ladder, closing the cap, and making to follow. Back into the space that held the bed they shared, the one they had shared every night since the first. The one she'd awakened in just a little while ago without a vampire pressed against her because he'd been ruminating on all he'd shared with the Buffy who belonged here.

The keepsake box was still on the floor. Made sense. Neither one of them had picked it up after he'd thrown it.

Buffy curled and uncurled her fingers, aware of every breath that rattled through her lips, the way her lungs swelled and released, the cool air against skin that was damp with sweat. She found herself gazing around the space already with some nostalgia, fueled with the need to remember the way it looked here. The way it probably didn't

in the world she'd left behind. The upstairs had been transformed into a functional apartment, more or less, and the downstairs served as its complement, with its assorted pieces of Buffy scattered here and there throughout, with the bathroom just down a stretch of tunnel. Bits and pieces that had somehow become hers when she hadn't been paying attention, that she thought might be hers for whatever came next in her life.

But it wasn't.

"It's easy, right?" she asked, her voice a bit rougher than she would have liked. "The sort of easy, evil thing we've agreed would be a bad decision."

Spike didn't say anything. When she turned, she found him knelt beside the keepsake box, running his finger along the broken hinge. She remembered breaking it. How alone she'd felt then, a prisoner of both her mind and a world that didn't want her. Haunted by her mistakes and desperate to escape them. Through it all, he had been there. With her, beside her, to keep her from shattering or giving up or facing anything by herself, even when that likely would have been the safer bet.

He loved her. She believed that—she couldn't not believe it, for all the ways he'd shown her. But he wasn't hers. Maybe he could have been eventually. Enough time and distance from where they'd started, once they had their own stories to rely upon and not shadows of a life he'd lived with someone else.

He loved her because she was Buffy. And it was time for Buffy to come home.

"Spike. I'm going to say yes."

He froze, glanced up, his expression guarded. "You're what now?"

"I'm going to sign whatever it is they need me to sign. I'm going back to my world."

At last, something in his eyes broke. A flicker of fear or wonder, perhaps both. He held her gaze for a long stretch, until his jaw started to tremble as though he were making an effort to keep from crying. The sight hurt as his admission earlier had hurt.

But she felt she understood now as she hadn't then. It wasn't that he loved one version of her more than another—he loved all parts of

Buffy. But the parts he knew the best were those that belonged to someone else.

"It's easy, like I said," she went on. "But also...not. What they want for this... Honestly, Spike, I don't think kids are in my future. I don't think I could handle worrying about mini-mes and the world at the same time. If this thing with Dawn has taught me anything, being a mom is a whole lot of stress and worry, and I already have that in spades. And as for the prophecy?" She snorted, hoping she sounded passably skeptical. "She's right. Prophecies are tricky. The last one that involved me said I would die, and the Master would rise. Both of those things happened, but hey, I'm still standing. If I even am the slayer in this prophecy... Well, it's like you said, there's always another way. We always find one. Apparently, I counted my chickens too soon when I thought you had it wrong. They weren't ready to roost yet."

The silence that followed was not unexpected. She had somewhat unloaded on him, this rambling stream of consciousness that was solidifying into rightness. The more the thought sat with her, the more she saw it for what it was. A door that was always going to open just because it could. They might have exhausted the ways to get her home, but that had never meant there were no others. It never did.

Finally, Spike worked his throat. "You wanna leave?"

"It's not that. I just don't belong here."

"Bollocks."

"You know it's true."

"No, I bloody don't. Have I been chattin' up a stone wall this whole time?"

Buffy shook her head, forcing herself to smile. "You told me as much the second night I was here. I don't belong here and—"

"I was brassed off that night. You'd thrown me for a bloody loop and—"

"Spike, it's okay." She managed to sound like she meant it. Managed to almost feel like she did, too. "It's okay to want her back. I know you love me, but this isn't my world. If there's a way for me to reset things, put them back the way they should be, I should take it." She paused and licked her lips, then decided, the hell with it. She was done

dancing around uncomfortable truths. "You want me to take it. You just don't want to admit it."

He favored her with that narrow look that had become so familiar. Had it always been? She didn't know—but over the past few days here, with him, she'd become rather adept at knowing when to expect it.

"You reckon so, do you?"

"I know so. And you do too."

Spike glared at her a moment longer before the fight in his eyes began to wane, fading in favor of something more like remorse or guilt. At length, he swore and looked away, put his back to her, hands propped on his hips, every inch of him rigid. "I thought we were it," he said in a low voice. "Fuck, I gave up."

"You didn't give up."

"Yeah, Slayer, I did." He shuddered with the weight of his sigh. "Told her I never would. Bloody promised her and..."

If there had been any doubt that she had made the right call, it died on those words. Buffy drew in a shaky breath, eyes that had cried too much over the last few days welling all over again, but there was no sense fighting it. No sense denying what it was for, either. And for a stretch, they just stood like that, Spike studying the wall, Buffy studying Spike, no more hiding from reality or each other.

"She will forgive you."

A beat, then he huffed and hung his head. "Don't know that I can be that optimistic."

"She will. The circumstances..."

"Circumstances bein' what, exactly?" Now he turned, still with that unreadable expression, his own eyes shining. "That I loved someone else? That I gave myself—would've given everythin'—to someone who... You had it right before, love. You're her but not her. Still everything I want, everythin' I love, but it's different, you and me."

"I know."

"You think she can forgive that?"

"Yes, I do." Buffy sniffed and glanced down, not bothering to wipe at her cheeks. "I know it. Because I would. *I* would. And even if I wouldn't, Spike, you know this is the right thing to do. She wants to come home—she didn't have a choice in what happened. I might not

have known it would go like this, but I knew it would be something. I knew it and I went along with it." Though she wasn't sure there, given what they had learned in the intervening days, if she had ever had a choice once she'd set eyes on the paw. If it had been her own desperation or the connection it forged with her mind that had pushed her to do the thing she'd done, make the wishes she had. Maybe that was one of those things they would never know for sure. It was a small price to pay. "Even if your Buffy can't forgive you, that's not a reason for me to take her place. Not if there's a way home."

He didn't say anything at first, just held her gaze as though daring her to blink. And again she thought about the other Buffy and how these particular looks, the ones unique to this Spike, would probably be a cinch for her to read. How well she knew him, how he could keep little from her. How perhaps he didn't realize that there was still so much of himself he held back—how, even if he had thought otherwise, part of him had not given up on the hope that this could be fixed, and all she needed to do to know it for certain was look at him.

"You would, though?" he asked, his voice hoarse. "You'd forgive me?"

"There wouldn't be anything to forgive."

"How can you say that?"

"Because of you. Everything you've done since learning the truth has been to get your Buffy back. I threw myself at you and that wasn't enough. It wasn't enough until I loved you too. Until I was as close to her as I could be without being her." Buffy forced another smile, one so tight it hurt. "I'll make sure she knows."

How, she had no idea, but he didn't ask her to elaborate. Just continued looking at her as though attempting to weigh her words—if she were saying things he wanted to hear or things she believed to be true.

He broke his gaze from her, wiped at his eyes, and rattled off a little laugh. "Must think I'm an arse. Meant everything I said these last couple—"

"I know you did."

"Have a funny way of showin' it, don't I?"

"Spike," she said, edging forward. "I don't blame you for wanting

her back—for wanting her more than me. There's so much between the two of you. So much I just...can't get because I didn't live it. Everything with Angel, the notes, all of it. If you were willing to throw all of that away, you wouldn't be you. And I love you."

"I love you too." He looked up again, something desperate crossing his face. "Never doubt that."

"I don't."

"We woulda made it work. If it—"

"I know." She forced herself closer still, close enough that she could place a hand on his arm—ground him or herself, she didn't know which. They both seemed to need it at the moment. "I know."

He searched her eyes—looking, she knew, for signs of doubt or misgiving. But there were none. It hurt, all of this hurt, but it also grounded her with a sense of rightness, of purpose she hadn't felt since before the jump. Since that moment when the sun had crested the horizon and she'd understood the hard thing she needed to do. All of the jealousy she had for this world's Buffy went up in smoke, the things she wanted being things she had.

Giles and Dawn, safe and sound where they belonged. Angel fulfilling his destiny in another city, living the life he was meant to live. And Spike. She had Spike. Whether here or there, she knew she did.

And should he find himself missing the Buffy who belonged here, well, she would just need to give that Buffy a run for her money.

With nothing left to consider, nothing to discuss, Buffy made her way back toward the ladder with Spike gathering in behind her.

"How is this going to work?" Buffy asked as she pulled herself onto the surface level. "I click my heels three times and go?"

Lilah whirled around, having been studying the hanging battleax, and plastered on what Buffy imagined was her customer service smile. As expected, her face registered zero surprise. She had known she had the ace in the hole. "We thought we could do it all together," she said. "Day after tomorrow at our Los Angeles office. Process the necessary documents stating that the Buffy Summers who lives here is actually alive, return Dawn Summers, and send you on your way."

"Why day after tomorrow? Why not right now?"

The customer service smile turned placating. "Well, Ms. Summers,

I appreciate your enthusiasm, but these things *do* take some time to get right. The contract we will have you sign will require some magical enhancements provided by a shaman who doesn't, strictly, live in this plane of reality."

"And if I change my mind between now and then?"

"I'm confident you won't."

So was Buffy, but she didn't bother saying as much. "Okay. Then what happens?" she asked. "I sign and we swap places? Just like that?"

"In essence," Lilah said, nodding. "You will be returned to the moment you made your initial wish in your world. In—"

"Wait, the *moment* I made my initial wish? So...back in time?"

"That's a vast over-simplification."

"But back—"

"Yes, Ms. Summers, if you want to get technical. For all intents and purposes, it will be as though no time has passed at all. You may pick up and resume your life as you see fit."

Somehow, Buffy had thought the surprises were behind her. Rookie mistake, that, and she was no rookie. For a moment, she couldn't think past it, and she didn't know why it mattered. Why the *when* mattered at all—just that it hadn't been what she expected. In every scenario involving her return home, there had been consequences. That she could just go back to the moment where she'd made the wishes and proceed as though it had never happened was beyond her wildest expectations.

It also meant Spike would have no memory of the other Buffy. She kinda hated how much she liked that thought. Liked the idea of being the only Buffy in his life.

"This is what we meant by *complete* reset," Lilah said after a moment, apparently interpreting Buffy's silence as hesitation. "This arrangement does benefit you rather heavily. You will be returned to that moment and granted license to do or undo anything your counterpart might have accomplished in the interim. However"—she flicked her gaze to Spike—"nothing *here* will reset. Reset the timeline and we reset the deal we made. Not in our best interest. So, you understand that when the correct Ms. Summers returns to this world, the terms will apply to her as well."

That much made sense, and she nodded to show she understood. While she hadn't thought that far ahead—how striking a bargain in this world would necessarily affect this world's Buffy—it seemed like a given in retrospect. Of course it would. That way Wolfram and Hart got everything it wanted.

Though just because it made sense to her didn't mean it would to everyone. Buffy darted her gaze back to Spike, half-expecting to catch that flash of anger across his face again, that indignation that had reared its head so many times over the last few days on his Buffy's behalf. It wasn't there. Perhaps he had come to the same conclusion she had—that her feelings on bearing children were likely to mirror that of his Buffy's. Or that there were other ways to have kids if kids were something she wanted. Or maybe now that he knew it was possible and that she was going through with it, the sacrifices involved to get everyone back where they belonged seemed incidental.

It didn't matter. Buffy knew, just as she knew the other Buffy wouldn't begrudge this Spike a thing that had happened in her absence, that it was a deal she'd make to come home. They were different in a few ways, but only a few, and the way they loved—the lengths they would go to for the people they loved—was not one of them.

"I understand," she told Lilah. And she did. Far more than she ever thought she would.

"Excellent," Lilah said, clasping her hands together. "Well, I'll just get out of your hair then. Be at our offices by two o'clock, day after tomorrow. We will have the necessary paperwork ready."

"And my sister."

"Safe and sound, just as promised."

Buffy nodded, opened her mouth to retort but she had run out of things to say. There was a good chance other concerns would occur to her once the lawyer was gone, but she could wait. Nothing was final until it was final. "Okay. Day after tomorrow."

"Day after tomorrow, two o'clock," Lilah agreed. "If that's all, I will leave you to make your preparations. I have a vampire turning to schedule."

That was right. God, what this world's Buffy was coming back to. Angel was returning to Los Angeles, picking up where he'd left off.

Dawn was coming home. She would be alive again on paper—able to open the shop, perhaps sell it to Anya. Spike was here as he had always been, and they could be together in the open. Maybe she would ask him to move in. If she wanted, she could. Everything that had gone wrong in her life would be fixed. If she was smart enough to see it that way, of course, and Buffy thought she was. As unsettling as her reality would undoubtedly be, there would be some silver lining.

She hoped so. Spike deserved that. *She* deserved that.

As for herself...

For Buffy, everything had changed as well. The world she returned to might be hers, but it would look so different, a thought that excited her and terrified her in equal measure.

And all there was to do now was wait until it was time to go there.

26

YOU OUGHT TO KNOW THAT I DIDN'T MEAN TO HURT YOU, I JUST WANTED YOU TO KNOW

IT HAD BEEN A LONG, LONG TIME SINCE BUFFY HAD PICKED UP A PEN with the intention of writing a letter. She'd taken copious notes in college, sure, before circumstances had forced her to drop out, and doodled along the margins of spiral-bound notebooks. Before that, in high school, there had been the occasional note slid to Willow so they could continue conversations started before class. But an actual letter? The last one she remembered writing had been brief and painful—whatever she'd left for her mother to find in her room to let her know that she'd taken the 'leave this house and you're never coming back' edict to heart.

The same could not be said for this world's Buffy. Sometime over the last year, this world's Buffy had become quite the pen-pal. Now, staring at a blank sheet of paper, Buffy wondered if it had been like this for her counterpart—wracking her brain for things to say, ways to say them, and hoping that it all sounded reasonably not-crappy when pieced together. Half a dozen times already, she'd thrown in the mental towel, pushed back her chair, muttered something about how she was the Slayer, not a novelist, and that she was stupid to step outside her comfort zone. Each time, though, she'd make it only as far as the door

before her promise to Spike crashed back over her, leaving her both resigned and pumped with renewed determination.

Also, it was something she would want. If the circumstances had been reversed, if it were she returning to a world she'd been ejected from, to a man who loved her so much he loved *all* of her. And there was a certain amount of baggage that Spike wasn't dumb to worry about. Buffy might not have lived the version of reality where the man Faith had boned while wearing her skin had been Angel, but she remembered how violated she'd felt when it had been Riley. That he hadn't noticed, that her body had been used without her permission, and how small and petty she'd felt in the aftermath. Everyone rushing to assure her that there was no way Riley could have known, that he had done nothing wrong, and while both of those things might have been true, that hadn't made the hurt she'd felt magically go away.

She and Spike had talked about this, too. The night she'd learned about this world, and he'd learned the Buffy he'd screwed at the Bronze hadn't been his Buffy. It had torn him up, thinking he had betrayed the woman he loved like that.

And so much had happened since then.

Buffy stared at the paper, willing the right words to come. Something natural, informal—something like what she would actually say to this world's Buffy if she had the chance. That she *wouldn't*, that she would never know how things turned out for her or Spike, was one of those painful revelations she wished she could have put off until after the switch had been made. It might make everything she had to convey seem less dire, relieve the pressure to craft a perfect explanation.

There was no perfect, though. Hell, if she had learned nothing else from her time in this world, it was that. Every silver lining had a cloud. Every good thing had a caveat.

So if perfect wasn't attainable, then she'd have to settle for what was.

Dear Beatrice,

I know you probably hate me. I don't blame you. Believe me, I am all with the self-hate. Not as much now as I was when I first got here, but enough. That's

not to make you feel sorry for me, by the way. You shouldn't. I did a dumb thing and you paid the price.

I've been sitting here, trying to figure out how to tell you the things I need to tell you. The most important thing, though, is something you already know but should probably hear anyway.

He loves you. He loves you so much. He's missed you, cried for you, done everything he thought to bring you home. He's hated me because I took you from him. He threw me out when I tried to force him to love me too. I mean really force. I essentially raped him. He doesn't see it that way (you know Spike, he's nothing if not stubborn) but that's what I did. I saw how much he loved you and I was you, so it should be easy, right? But I didn't feel that way for him, or I didn't know I did. I was trying to take advantage of how he loves you to be you. I really wanted to be you.

He made it clear. There is only one Buffy for him. Which is why he thinks there's a chance that you might hate him now.

She paused, sat back and studied the words she had written. Tried to see them as she imagined the other Buffy would—tried to put herself in that space. Put in black and white, the things she'd done to Spike were even uglier than she'd realized. Seeing the word *rape* was jarring, almost as jarring as it was living with it in her head. And she didn't like it, could almost taste the anger the other Buffy would undoubtedly experience, the anger she knew was just and deserved. Along with the questions the other Buffy would ask—that Buffy herself had asked a thousand times since that awful morning. How Spike could have forgiven her for the terrible thing she'd done, how he could have continued to help her, say he loved her and mean it. Spike wasn't noble by any means—he had plenty of selfish in him. But when it came to her, to the wrongs she'd committed against him, he had a way of becoming rather altruistic.

I didn't know I loved him when I got here. Obviously, I asked for your life and that was what the paw gave me, in the way only it could, I guess. I think I needed to see that, what it would be like if things had worked out with Angel. Spike told me stuff I didn't want to hear, didn't believe until Angel confirmed it. If you've been in my world, you know my Spike (maybe more than I want to

think about) and you've probably guessed we're not together. That probably also makes no sense to you. There was just so much of him I didn't see before coming here and being around a Spike who loves me but wasn't trying to win me.

I know you'll hate to hear it, but I owe you. A lot. I got to fall in love all over again and it was so totally unlike anything I had before. But it was never mine. Not even after he believed there was no way to get you back and I told him I loved him. He loved me because I'm Buffy, but he never stopped wanting you. And I know that he's not going to miss me and I'm okay with that. Really. I like knowing how much he loves me, how deep that is and how it's just me, even if there are other me's around. What I love most is that I have that to make my own when I get back.

I can't tell you what to do, Other Buffy, but I can tell you what would be stupid to do, and that's to hold Spike's love for you, for us, against him.

The crypt door swung open without ceremony, jolting Buffy out of her head and making the pen skid somewhat across the paper, trailing a line of ink.

"Honey, I'm home," Spike called out and snickered at himself as he kicked the door shut, saddled as he was with takeout bags. He started over toward the kitchen nook, arched an eyebrow when he saw her sitting where she had been when he'd left her. "Still havin' trouble with that?"

If she hadn't known him as well as she did, she might have missed the slight lilt in his voice, the one that betrayed just how nervous he was. Ever since she'd suggested writing this world's Buffy a note to try to explain everything that had happened, he had been both relieved and on edge. No one she'd listen to more than herself, he reckoned, even if she was a stubborn bird on the best days. He'd said it with an affectionate smile, though not one steady enough to hide just how nervous he was. Buffy wanted to tell him there was nothing to be nervous about but hearing that had never helped anyone, ever, and she wouldn't be here to live it down if it turned out she was wrong.

She didn't think she was wrong, she really didn't. But she understood why Spike worried.

"I think I finally found my stride," she replied. "Just need to wrap it up, then I'll go make the drop."

"The drop?"

"Well, yeah." She blinked up at him. "The tree? Isn't that where she'll look?"

Spike huffed. "Just leave it here, love. I'll make sure she—"

"I don't want you reading it."

"Oh, no?" He arched an eyebrow, and dammit, she could have cursed herself for saying anything in the first place. "And why's that?"

"I mean...you can read it. I just want it to be after I'm gone."

That didn't do anything to get the eyebrow to reset. Now he threw in a head tilt for good measure. "What's the worry? Think I'll poke fun at your spelling? Try to teach you a thing or two about grammar? Not exactly my concern, is it?"

"What's wrong with my spelling or grammar?"

"Just the fact that sometimes—no, you're not changin' the subject on me. Why don't you want me readin' it? Spinnin' yarns?"

"No. I'm writing about how much you love her." And in doing so, exposing all the fears and resentments she'd held for this world's Buffy since she'd realized just how much she herself was lacking. Mostly, she didn't want Spike to see that she'd guessed he wouldn't miss her and put him in the awful position of lying about it. She didn't want him feeling sorry for her. As much as the thought stung that this revolutionary thing that had happened to her here was far less meaningful to him, she truly did feel like she understood now. Spike had already had all these revelations. Whatever he had yet to learn about her or their relationship would reflect a journey they had made side-by-side. All Buffy had done since she'd gotten here was play catch-up.

But she didn't want to have that argument on what was likely their last night together. She didn't want to argue at all. This time tomorrow, she would be back in her own Sunnydale, with her own friends, and her own Spike, and this Spike would have his Buffy back. While she knew Spike wouldn't miss her—he'd have no reason to—she didn't want his last memory of this version of her to be them bickering over something so trivial. She certainly didn't want him to think she'd left this world unhappy.

She wasn't unhappy. She couldn't say she was happy, exactly, but there was some calm in understanding things as she hadn't before. And

a healthy measure of relief that she hadn't known to expect—not only that a way home had been opened to them, but the way it had been opened. As though Lilah Morgan, evil bitch that she was, had somehow had a window to Buffy's mind and read her fears. That this deal would erase everything that had happened in her world with the other Buffy meant there would be nothing to live up to. No way for her friends or Dawn or Spike to lament the loss of the more-together Buffy. A true reset, as Lilah had said.

Spike stood there studying her for a moment as though trying to determine whether or not it was worth arguing the point. In the end, though, he blew out a breath and made his way over to the kitchen nook. "Won't look at it," he said shortly. "No sense puttin' it in the tree, though. I'll give it to her the second she's...second she's here again."

She suddenly had this image of herself—or this world's Buffy—looking around in utter confusion only to have Spike shove a letter under her nose and demand she read it right off. It was both funny and tragic.

"You might give her time to breathe," she said, turning her attention back to the letter. "Figure out where she is and what happened before you start making with the confessions."

He grunted, noncommittal, fixedly pulling containers out of bags and doing what was becoming a familiar dance of plate collecting and preparation. It wouldn't be familiar for much longer, though. When she left the crypt, it would be for the last time—this version of it, at least. The one back in her world didn't have the kitchen setup or the hallmarks of home hanging on the walls. It would be stark. No evidence of a life shared with Buffy.

She breathed out and lowered her gaze back to the letter. Now that she'd started the damn thing, gotten as far as she had, she found there was a lot she wanted to say. More than she had time to write, and her hand was cramping from the words she'd already committed to paper, as holding a pen apparently used different muscles than wielding a stake. Plus, the aroma of whatever Spike had picked up for dinner was making her stomach rumble, so she decided to stick to the simple truths rather than ramble.

"Here," Spike said, setting a plate of toasted ravioli—like the one he had carefully arranged that night that seemed so long ago—just above the head of the letter. "Eat up. Promise I won't throw it around this time."

It took her a moment to recover the memory, but she grinned when it surfaced—not out of fondness, necessarily, but appreciation for how far they'd come since he'd sent the plate hurtling into the column. All because she'd told him who she was. Because he'd realized his Buffy was gone. Fitting choice, then, for the night before he got her back. She had no doubt that was by design.

Buffy favored him a smile, plucked up one of the raviolis, and dunked it into the proffered cup of marinara. "Thanks."

He kept his gaze on her as she bit into the breading, following the motion of her mouth with a different sort of hunger. One that made it difficult to not do something overly suggestive like lick her lips or moan. It was strange but probably a good thing that everything had reset with them, too. There had been no question about it after Lilah had left the previous afternoon, no need to discuss the arrangement at all. Buffy hadn't pushed and neither had he—they just understood they were back to being platonic roomies.

But it was different now. Before, Spike hadn't known she loved him. Neither had she, though she'd known she wanted him. They both had known that.

And *because* it was different now, she wasn't entirely sure that he would say no if she suggested it. He still loved her and she loved him, and even if it wasn't what he'd had with this world's Buffy, it had been something. *They* had been something.

But she didn't want to suggest it. She didn't want to say goodbye to him like that and she didn't want to sully the memories she did have of the couple of days when it had been just them. She also didn't want to put him in the position of turning her down, which would make whatever time they had left even more strained and awkward than it was at the present.

So, at length, Buffy pulled her gaze from his and refocused on the letter. The one she was writing to the woman who belonged here with him. She didn't know how to wrap up something like this any more

than she'd known how to start it, and figured if left to her own devices, she could have written it forever, articulating how the days she'd spent in the world she'd stolen had changed her. But she didn't have that kind of time.

Eventually, though, words came, and she gave them shape. Whether or not they were the right words was an argument for another day. They felt true and she felt finished. This side of a conversation she would never get to have in earnest.

"Promise me you'll let her read this before you do," Buffy said, folding the sheet in half. "Promise me and mean it."

Spike had moved the plates over to the table, along with a jar of blood she supposed he intended to mix in with his marinara sauce. When she spoke, he looked up rather sharply, his heart in his eyes as always. "I promise." A pause. "Promise me I won't wanna bloody throttle you after I've read it."

"Can't. But even if you wanna, you won't be able to."

"Slayer..."

"It's okay, Spike. Whatever it is now...it's fine." She glanced down at the scrumptious helping of noodles and cheese he'd set before her. "And thanks for dinner. I do love Archie's."

The smile he gave her was soft and something else. Not sad, not quite, but close enough. "I know."

They ate in relative silence, which didn't really surprise her. There was nothing to talk about now. Not really. Nothing except the looming deadline of two o'clock the following day. Part of her wanted to head to LA tonight, get the drive behind them so that she could focus on what came next. Think about what she would do once she was back in her own world. What her first steps would be, returning to the problems she had left behind—money and caring for Dawn topping the list. Funny how a few days could warp one's perspective. The thought wasn't without the normal dread, that utter hopelessness that had nipped at her heels as she'd made her way up and down the stairs at the Magic Box, trapped inside some loop she'd have to break. And god, she'd managed to nearly forget about that, stupid as it was. That would be the first thing on her agenda—snapping out of the loop. Maybe she could work that into her

contract with the lawyers so she wouldn't have to deal with it on the other side.

But breaking the loop would do nothing to solve the reason Buffy had been at the Magic Box in the first place.

"I need a job," she said, placing her fork down. "When I get back, money will be a problem again."

Spike nodded as though he'd been waiting for her to bring this up, then stuck a bite into his mouth. "Could always talk to me—the me that's there," he said once he'd swallowed. "Know he'd help if you asked."

"Help?"

"With whatever you need, pet." He returned his attention to his plate, speared his noodles with his fork and twirled up another bite. "Had the same talk with her once but she didn't fancy it too much at the time."

"You offered to get Buffy money?"

"Angel not exactly bein' the stalwart provider, yeah." The corner of his mouth twitched. "She didn't care for that. Was before we were shagging, I think. Maybe just before. Wanker had gotten himself booted from a cushy job your watcher had helped him land and she was worried. Always so bloody worried. Told her I'd help out and that spooked her." The twitch bloomed into a full-out grin. "Didn't stop her from snaggin' tasty treats I kept on hand here, though. Started poppin' over for a nibble before we'd head out to patrol. Once, I think about a week in, I asked her if she was usin' me for my body or my well-stocked fridge. Got her nice and worked up about that."

Buffy glanced at the selection of foods lining the shelves in the kitchen nook. "She started eating here?"

"Not like she had much choice. Too bloody proud to ask for help from Joyce or the watcher. Not sure what Angel did for nosh and never much cared." He was quiet for a moment. "Went through a rough patch. He was bouncin' from job to job, not findin' anything that suited. Slayer would worry about money on top of all else. Bloody hard when her mum was... Well, you know."

She nodded, dragging the prongs of her fork over her noodles. It had been there all along, she knew, in the days following her mother's

death. The lurking knowledge that the person responsible for bringing home the bacon was gone. And how to fill that void from a practical standpoint had been a question mark—a question mark she hadn't felt bad about avoiding, as part of her had also known her own time ran short. It hadn't been conscious but it had been good, on some level. The relief that came of thinking of how things after Glory wouldn't matter to her. The reason she could never see beyond that big battle, with or without Dawn. Spike had known from the start—he'd told her so one night, outside the Bronze, and she hadn't wanted to hear it. It hadn't hit her that her death wish had been resurrected as well until she'd sat on the bed with Angel's gun in her lap, and the thought frightened her, how close it was. How close it remained, even as the burden she shouldered had started to lessen. But going back to it—to the world that had come equipped with these problems—fueled her with a healthy dose of fear and resolve.

There were answers to every problem. She would find one.

"Any suggestions?" she asked. "I suppose there are always burgers to flip."

"Believe I just told you what to do, love. Your Spike, you ask him for help and—"

"He'll help, I know. But I can't just rely on him. Any more than Buffy could rely on Angel."

A scowl crossed his face. "Think I'd leave you hanging high and dry, is that it? The git couldn't stand not bein' the one to call the shots. That's what got him sacked from every job he tried. Me? I can—"

"It's not that," Buffy cut in, and she smiled when she realized how true that was. Whatever problems Angel had faced in the workforce, she couldn't see the same applying to Spike. Not because he'd be a model employee or anything—hell, whatever solution he came up with would likely be legally, if not morally, dubious—but he would do what was necessary to take care of the people he loved. No matter what it meant, what pride he had to swallow. That was just the way he was—whatever it took. "But that can't be it. I need something that I can give to social services. A job they can follow up on and see I'm doing, and doing well. That *I* have the means of providing for Dawn. I just don't know what that is. Never gave it much thought."

Spike responded with a noncommittal grunt. "Savin' the world oughta come with some perks, yeah? Ever think about askin' the Council of Wankers to—"

"Have even more control over my life? Hard pass."

"They owe you. Died for the world, didn't you?"

"They don't see it that way and, being that there's only one of me and I-don't-know-how-many of them, I'm thinking it'd probably be an uphill battle to try and unionize." She stuck a bite of cooling pasta into her mouth and chewed, thinking back. Then she snickered. "I guess there's always law enforcement."

"Ooh, that come with a fetching uniform and all?"

"I dunno. Some aptitude test I took in high school said I'd be suited for it." A pause. "Right around the time you hired out a bunch of assassins to kill me, if memory serves."

Spike's lip curled but he didn't look up. "Good times."

"That really doesn't sound like you, you know. Hiring out the killing of the Slayer."

"*Not* like me. Wasn't aimin' to kill you, pet, just keep you occupied." Now he did look up, his eyes dancing. And if it was strange that he could be so amused while discussing a period in which they had truly been enemies, neither commented on it. Nor the fact that she found she was also amused rather than perturbed. Just another sign that normal had never been in the cards for her. Mutual attempts on one another's lives would, in their world, be something like foreplay. As he'd told her from the beginning. "Woulda been mighty brassed if they'd managed to actually off you. You were magnificent, the best I'd ever seen. Wanted you off my back for five seconds so I could restore Dru, sure, but in terms of actual killing? You had to notice when the hits stopped comin'—and that was *after* you snapped my bloody back and landed me in that sodding chair. No, Slayer. You were always mine to kill. Only mine."

"I find it a bit disturbing that I like that as much as I do."

He chuckled and raised the glass of blood he'd sat next to his plate. "Cheers. Been my life since I fell in love with you."

The air fell silent again, heavy with the absence of conversation. Buffy took the time to wolf down as much of her dinner as possible,

once more running through the things that would be waiting for her when she was home. If the lawyers couldn't guarantee she wouldn't find herself trapped inside a loop again, she needed something up her sleeve, lest she find herself stabbing a mummy hand every ten minutes for the rest of her days before it could choke the life out of her.

That thought tickled something. It took a second to chase down, but when she did, she experienced a rush of relief.

"Anya said the mummy hand was defective," she blurted before she could help herself. Then, at Spike's frown, she rushed to elaborate, "The one that I was trying to sell when I got stuck in the loop—when I found the paw in the first place."

Spike blinked. "All right..."

"I was stuck there trying to sell something that I couldn't sell. Maybe it being defective had something to do with it." She had no idea what sort of spells called for mummy hands, but if Anya was right, it seemed too coincidental that she would have gotten trapped while attempting to sell something that was unsellable. Or perhaps that had been the paw's influence, too. Everyone kept reminding her that the thing wanted to be used. "I dunno. Maybe if I'm still stuck there when I get back, I can try to explain that it's defective."

"Seems as good a theory as any, I'd wager." Spike had more or less cleaned his plate and was currently mopping up the remaining sauce-and-blood combo with a piece of vampire-lore-defying garlic bread. Then he paused, looked at her from the corner of his eye, and said in a more subdued tone, "You still sure you wanna do this?"

She should have expected it—probably had on some level. Either way, she was quick to answer. "Yes."

"Yeah? Even with what they're askin'?"

"I told you, children aren't really a thing I think would fit in my life. And if I'm going to be with a vampire—"

"And you are? Plannin' on bein' with me. With him. When you get back."

"Seems kinda stupid to be in love with a guy who's in love with me and not go for it."

A somewhat chagrined smile stretched his lips at that. "Well, yeah. That's the way I see it, but I know the way your mind works, Summers.

Different world, different rules, and all that. Seemed like your mates might raise hell if you start showin' up with a vamp on your arm."

"Oh, it'll be a discussion. The last time they thought I was sleeping with you, they staged an intervention."

Spike snorted, shaking his head, his eyes back on his plate. "Gits."

"They had their reasons."

"Yeah, I'll just bet they did."

"But what they say... They'll get used to it. Maybe even understand, once I tell them what happened here."

His eyebrows shot up. "Gonna share all, are you?"

"Well, my version will probably be PG. There are things no one needs to know about me." Except maybe she would share with Willow —see if it felt natural, like it had once upon a time. Back when they hadn't had secrets. When it had all been about what she could do to win Angel's heart for keeps.

That thought brought something else to mind, and Buffy rushed to catch it before it slipped off again. "A few days ago, when we were talking about what would happen with my Spike, you said you thought he'd want to win me. That if your Buffy was over there with him... I was worried that he might prefer her over me. Being there and...not being mixed-signal, messed-up Buffy. Someone who loves him. You said even if that was true, that my Spike would want to win me on his own. Fight until I love him."

He offered a flat sort of smile, then nodded. "Sounds about right, yeah."

"And if there is no fight? If it's just, 'Knock knock. By the way, I love you.'"

"Yeah, 'cause none of it has been a fight up until now."

"But I didn't know I loved *any* Spike until I came here. Until you."

"Maybe. Doesn't mean there wasn't a fight." Spike narrowed his eyes at her as though uncertain she was being genuine. "Bloody hell, Slayer, you said it yourself. Oughta know as I was sittin' right there." He waved toward the couch. "Felt it before you knew what it was. Mentioned a bunch of moments I didn't remember 'cause they weren't ones we shared. The bloke over there already did the winning. Just took you a minute to realize that's what it was."

Buffy exhaled slowly, some tension she hadn't realized she had loosening within her. She didn't know why she was surprised that he remembered what she'd said that night—Spike had long since stopped shocking her with attention to detail. Maybe that it was there so readily, that comment. Like he'd been thinking on it with the same ferocity that she'd been thinking on all the things he'd shared with his Buffy, wondering how she measured up and not really wanting the answer.

And again as though reading her thoughts, Spike shifted and sighed, nodding at the letter she'd set aside. "Wager the reason you don't want me to read what you said to her is 'cause you think I'm countin' down the seconds."

"It's okay if you are. I don't blame you."

"No, but you think I regret it. You and me. Think I wish I could take it back."

She wasn't sure what she thought, to be honest. If he could take it back, it'd simple up his concerns that his Buffy would punish him for having been with someone else—loving someone else. But everything she felt there was based on her own conclusions from living in her own head. He'd never once made her feel like a regret. Even with what they knew now, what was happening tomorrow, he made her feel loved.

"Mighta done things differently," he continued, again as though reading her mind, "if I'd known... If we hadn't thought it was over. That there was no gettin' her back." He was quiet for a beat, then shook his head and sat up a bit straighter. "But I think I'll dust bein' grateful to you. Hard as it was, your bein' here helped clear my head a bit. Reconsider my place in her life."

"Reconsider?"

He nodded. "As good as it is with her, I can't say I never wondered what mighta been if Grandaddy Forehead weren't in the picture. If it was just the two of us. Not havin' to sneak around and the like, you know."

Yeah, she knew. She also remembered, a couple of days ago, when he'd been hesitant to believe that she would take their relationship public once Angel was well and truly gone. Once the rules changed and he could be more than her dirty little secret. Spike might never have doubted Buffy's love for him, but he had doubted how it would fare

when the obstacles keeping them from being truly together were no longer obstacles. When they could just be.

"Now I know, don't I?" he went on. "If it weren't for the way things went, it might never have happened at all for you, even if it always would for me."

He waited, and she could tell he wanted her to argue, say that she would have found her way to him eventually. But Buffy was done lying, even if the truth wasn't pretty. She couldn't say for sure what would have happened if she hadn't had this experience, despite the fact that she'd very much wanted Spike, even loved him. That love was so different from what she'd called love before she wasn't sure she ever would have recognized it for what it was. Prior to coming to this world, she'd believed love had a definite feel, one that she'd experienced fully once and with such burning intensity it had nearly killed her. Anything that hadn't been true love in her head, twisted as it was—more a bastardized, sanitized version of something she would never feel in whole ever again.

She wanted to think that she would have realized how wrong she'd been on her own. She wanted a lot of things and was sure about none of them.

Before she could think about forming a reply, though, a knock sounded on the crypt door, jarring her from her thoughts. Buffy went rigid in her seat, shot through with an unexpected jolt of adrenaline. The only person she could think of who might have reason to drop by was Lilah Morgan. Perhaps bearing bad news—reneging on the deal. "We weren't expecting anyone, were we?" she asked.

Spike had already risen to his feet and was halfway to the door. "Not like people can call ahead."

It wasn't Lilah, thank god, though Buffy didn't let herself relax as Angel crossed the threshold. He wasn't alone, either. Beside him was a man that looked familiar in a way she couldn't quite contextualize. Lean build, short dark brown hair, glasses, and wearing a pair of jeans and a deep burgundy sweater. Nonthreatening, whoever he was. Not a lawyer.

"Thanks for answering this time," Angel said shortly. "Really wasn't looking forward to a repeat."

Spike flashed a sour grin as he made his way back to the table. "Well, if we knew you were comin'..."

"Don't worry. I don't plan on staying long." Angel helped himself deeper into the crypt, and after an awkward pause, the man with him followed. "Buffy," said her estranged husband, walking toward her with purpose, "you remember Wesley, don't you?"

It took her a beat longer than it should have for recognition to set in—blindsided as she was by Angel's presence and on edge about everything else. But the name infused her with calm, even before her brain caught up. Yes, of course it was Wesley—just not Wesley as she'd ever seen him. Gone was the uptight suit and perpetual smugness that had been so characteristic in her memory. His hair wasn't slicked back, either, and he'd clearly skipped shaving for the past couple of days.

"Wesley," she said. "Yeah, sorry. You don't look the way I remember."

"I will take that as a compliment," the former watcher replied, and his voice sounded different too. Softer, kinder. "It's good to see you, Buffy."

"I called to let them know that I was coming back," Angel said, ready when Buffy shot him a questioning look. "See if there was a place for me at Angel Investigations."

That wasn't really an explanation as to why he was here—either of them—but she decided to ignore that for the moment.

"Angel Investigations?" she asked instead, glancing back to Wesley. "You kept the name?"

He offered a businesslike smile. "He hadn't developed a large clientele when he left, but Cordelia and Doyle thought it better to continue building off an existing reputation, small as it was, rather than start from scratch. We don't get too many questions, Los Angeles being the City of Angels." Wesley waited a beat, then stepped forward and with an air that telegraphed he was over the small talk. "Angel has informed me about...well, I suppose everything that has happened here over the last few days, including your plans to do business with Wolfram and Hart."

"Not just my plans," Buffy said, and if her tone was a bit defensive,

she didn't think anyone could blame her. "He made a deal with them, too."

"Yes. That is one of the reasons I am here." Wesley flicked his gaze briefly to Angel. "I thought it might be better to make this suggestion in person. Lindsey McDonald is... I won't say an *associate* of ours, but he has provided us with enough information over the years that we have found valuable, so we have come to rely on him when it comes to our dealings with Wolfram and Hart. Unfortunately, Lilah Morgan has shut him out of talks regarding yours and Angel's contracts, leaving us without the insight we would prefer."

The tension that had uncoiled started to tighten once more. Not that she had ever been in the habit of listening to Wesley, but this was different—he was different and so was she. And there was something in his tone she didn't like. "I'm hoping there's a *but* in there."

He offered a wry grin. "*However*, we are not without our resources—one I have suggested that Angel visit before anything is finalized, and he has agreed. I can't tell you what to do, Buffy... Never could, actually, but I would be remiss if I didn't strongly advise you to visit with a friend of ours before it is too late to back out."

Go figure. She hadn't had any second thoughts until now.

"A friend?" she asked in a smaller voice than she would have liked. "Is this friend a lawyer or something?"

The wry grin turned into a genuine smile, and she was so startled by it—how egoless and self-effacing it was—that she nearly forgot what they had been talking about. While it had taken her a second to place Wesley, she remembered well the old thoughts and prejudices she'd once harbored. But the more he talked, the more she saw that his fashion sense was perhaps the least dramatic of the changes he'd undergone since leaving Sunnydale.

"Hardly," Wesley replied. "No, Lorne is the proprietor of an establishment called Caritas. It's a safe haven for demons and humans alike—no, really," he added at her skeptical frown. "There is a sanctuary spell in place that prevents any physical violence from occurring on his premises. But that's not why I think you should visit him. Lorne is an empath demon. His specialty is ensuring you are on the right path by reading you."

That didn't sound ominous at all. "Reading? What does he read?"

"Your aura and your future. All you would have to do is sing for him."

"Is that a euphemism or...?"

Wesley shook his head, the picture of sincerity. "Caritas is a karaoke bar."

Buffy sat back hard enough her shoulders gave a whine of protest as they collided with the chair's back. "This is starting to sound seriously made-up."

Another smile cracked his lips. "Well, Los Angeles attracts all types. I trust Lorne implicitly. If he reads you and doesn't see any issue with proceeding as planned, then I believe you have nothing to fear from signing whatever Wolfram and Hart puts in front of you."

That was a tall order—heady, too. The idea that Wesley, the same Wesley who had been such a thorn in her side during senior year, would place that much confidence in a demon left her mind a little more than boggled. And confused. Demons, in the Book of Buffy, were not friends. Not unless they were certain souled vampires or certain vampire lovers. A demon who could literally read her future was just this side of wiggy.

But she'd been wrong about things before, she thought as she looked at Spike. Way wrong. And Wesley pitching this—as memories flew hard at her, reminding her of the times he'd tried to intervene when he'd known Angel was holding things of great power or value—went a long way in terms of credibility. If she was about to do business with an evil law firm, it couldn't hurt to have some idea of how things would turn out.

"Yeah, okay," she said, turning back to Wesley. "I guess."

"Excellent." Wesley beamed at her—looking, for the first time, somewhat recognizable as his old self. Though not in a way that made her want to rebel or throw things at him or both. If anything, he made her think of Giles, which made her realize how close she was to seeing Giles again. How close she was to home.

"Say you're gonna sing for this chap, too?" Spike asked. When Buffy looked up, she saw he was staring at Angel, his eyebrows in full arch-mode.

Angel shifted his weight between his feet. "Yeah. Seems best."

"Gonna at least warn him first?"

Buffy frowned again. "Warn him?"

"Your husband can't carry a tune to save his life. Or yours," Spike explained with a mean little smirk.

"Hey!" Angel snapped.

"What? Can you?"

"That's beside the point." He glowered at the vampire a second longer before refocusing on Buffy. "I've also asked Willow to accompany us back, as I rather doubt it's Wolfram and Hart's intention to equip me with a soul. I'm taking no chances. Even if it means I have to sing."

Buffy sighed, a heaviness she hadn't even known was there rolling off her. How awful was it that she hadn't even considered that when Lilah had mentioned it—that her thoughts had been entirely on Dawn. Or maybe she had trusted Angel wouldn't make a deal without it. Either way, hearing that he had a plan went a long way in reassuring her he'd thought this through. That he was making this decision with a clear head. She nodded to show she understood.

"Thank you," she said. "For doing this."

He lifted a shoulder. "They offered me nothing I wasn't already considering."

"And that they want you to be a vampire again? That's not cause for second thoughts?"

"Well, that's where Willow comes in. Whatever they think they're getting from me, they're not."

"Buffy," Wesley said, speaking with the authority of someone who wanted to maintain control of the conversation. That was more like the Wesley she remembered, at least. "I wanted to discuss something else with you, while I'm here. In the course of our talk, Angel mentioned that you are in possession of a monkey's paw."

The tension she'd released earlier snapped back into place. Buffy went ramrod straight; so, as she saw out of her periphery, did Spike. "What about it?" she asked.

"I understand Rupert was attempting to purchase the paw from its previous owner when he died," Wesley said, not reacting to her sudden

rigidity. Evidently not surprised. "I also know Wolfram and Hart wants it, and just because they have agreed to alternative arrangements doesn't mean they will cease their campaign to acquire what they want. I'd like to ask that you entrust it to me."

Her heart skipped. That was a tall order. "To you," Buffy echoed dully.

"My intention is to destroy it," he added. "As I imagine was Rupert's. But if we cannot, I can assure it is kept quite well protected."

"Anya said there was only one way to destroy it, and that way doesn't exist anymore."

Wesley nodded, but it was clear he didn't believe it. "It could be she is correct. I would like the opportunity to prove her wrong. And if I can't, I believe everyone would benefit from knowing that it is kept in a place where it cannot be accessed or otherwise cause further damage."

It took a second for her heartbeat to slow down again. All things paw-related were touchy. In truth, though, she hadn't thought that far ahead. Hadn't thought at all what would happen to the paw once she exited this reality. It had been there, in the back of her mind, the thing that Spike had left secreted away in the Magic Box basement, but more just as a mental check.

Then she thought of the hungry look on Willow's face the night they had shown up at the dorm. The way Tara had wordlessly pleaded with Buffy to get the paw as far away from them as possible. And of Willow's initial confidence that she would find a loophole, that she could find Buffy's world, that she could do all sorts of things she, in fact, had not been able to do but likely would have continued to try if she hadn't been made to stop.

Leaving something like that here was dangerous, especially since Willow had yet to let the impossible slow her down.

It shouldn't just be her call, though. Not when she wasn't the one who would have to live with the consequences. She couldn't ask the other Buffy for a second opinion, but she could do the next best thing. So, Buffy did what had become natural and right and met Spike's gaze. "Thoughts?"

Spike studied her for a moment, considering, then looked back to

Wesley. "Stays with you," he said rather pointedly. "*Only* you. No one else gets their mitts on it. And don't open the bloody case. That's how it gets in your head."

Wesley nodded. "I quite agree."

"Mean it, mate. No one else." And now he shot Angel a not-so-conspicuous look.

Angel bristled, rolling his eyes. "Spike—"

"Only me," Wesley agreed, and met Angel's scoff with a hard stare of his own. This version of the former watcher certainly had spine. "The case will not be opened under any circumstance, save, perhaps, to test out ways to destroy it. There is an antidote to its powers, though, which we will have on hand at all times. And if you like, I will inform you and Buffy before we make any such attempt in the event you wish to observe."

Another long pause as Spike measured him up, and Buffy knew she had been right. At last, she had been right where Spike was concerned. If anyone would take the paw seriously, if anyone should have a call on what became of it, it was him.

"Right then," he said at last, stepping forward. "Fancy a field trip? I'll show you where I stashed it."

27

I LOVE YOU, GOODBYE

BUFFY SPENT THE BULK OF THE DRIVE TO LOS ANGELES WORRYING about what she would sing. It was a stupid thing. Mindless, even, but it consumed her thoughts in a way that was borderline obsessive. Easier, she supposed, to worry about what she'd sound like on the stage of some karaoke bar than the reality of what was going to happen later that day.

That she was driving to Los Angeles with no intention of driving back. That when Spike swung around and aimed the car at the Hellmouth, she wouldn't be in the seat beside him. At least, that was the plan. Assuming all went well at this karaoke bar and Wesley's friend saw no reason for her to change her mind—that she wasn't about to sign a deal that would bite them all in their collective ass. It had sounded good when Wesley had pitched it—smart, even. But the more miles the DeSoto ate between Sunnydale and LA, the more she second-guessed her ready agreement.

Maybe it was better to not know. Maybe it was better to not be presented with reasons to change her mind. Because she didn't *want* to change her mind. She didn't want to have come this far only to go back, especially given there were things she couldn't just magically zap

out of her head—things that had only been made obvious as a result of the deal the evil lawyer bitch had waved in front of her.

Leaping into this blind would be so much easier if she could leap in blind. She wouldn't have to shoulder the burden of awfulness yet to come based on an action she'd taken. Even if the consequences were dire—even if this empath demon saw misery ahead—what was that to continuing to live in a world where she was everyone's second choice?

Spike would argue, of course. He wouldn't be Spike if he didn't. But he wouldn't believe it as readily as he had before, either. Living through this offer was proof enough that whatever he'd told her or himself hadn't been the full sum. He could love her and did, she knew, but it wasn't the same love and trying to pretend like it was—even if neither of them had admitted that at the time—would have caught up with them in the end.

It was both sad and not, believing this. *Knowing* it. On one hand, she loved how Spike loved. That everything that had happened thus far, had carried them to where they were now, was a result of that love. He'd fought for her and his Buffy and he'd loved them both, and he kept fighting. And it was in that love that she saw there had never been a true concern in replacing this world's Buffy, for if that love was the same, then it wouldn't matter to him who stayed and who left, and it *did* matter. It mattered to her, too. It mattered that Buffy Summers was someone no one could hope to replace, even if the person who tried was herself.

Wesley had given Spike the address of the karaoke bar, and it wasn't in an area of the massive city she'd ever been familiar with. Her parents hadn't been much on the demon hotspot circuit when she'd lived here before, and being the pampered princess that she had been, she'd had little reason to visit any of LA's darker or seedier corners. That was until she'd been Called, but her stint as the Slayer of Los Angeles had been rather brief.

She needn't have worried, though. Spike knew where to go. He pointed the club out to her as he coasted past it—"There we are, love. And with any luck, we beat your husband. Would like to be long gone before he starts crooning."—then hung a sharp left down a shaded alley in search of a place to park.

"You're going to get a ticket here," Buffy said, moving to open the door.

He smirked.

"Yeah, yeah." She grinned a little herself, falling into pace beside him as he strode toward the mouth of the alley.

As it turned out, they *had* arrived ahead of Angel and the others. Likely owing to the fact that, even if Wesley had shepherded vampire and witch into his car before the sun had risen, Spike drove like a man possessed and had absolutely zero regard for things like traffic laws or speed limits. How he managed to evade speed traps and highway patrolmen was a mystery to her, but they had reached the city in record time. Much earlier than expected. A point the empath demon, who was dressed in a fluffy pink bathrobe with a matching towel wrapped around his head, made clear after he opened the door to allow a smoking Spike out of the sun's rays.

"Honestly, kids, you couldn't have waited until after morning coffee?" The demon heaved a sigh and strode over to the bar, where he proceeded to make himself a drink that was definitely not coffee. "I understand you're eager, but mama needs her beauty rest."

"Sorry," Buffy said, and it felt decidedly weird to apologize to such an obvious demon. She didn't know what she'd had in mind when Wesley had described this guy—maybe someone a bit more subtle so that there might have been a question about his heritage that afforded him time to end up on the do-not-slay list. There was absolutely nothing subtle about Lorne, though, with his deep green skin, red eyes, and horns. Granted, she didn't see the horns until he removed the towel, but there they were. All pointy and attached to his head.

Not that Buffy necessarily subscribed to the slay-first-ask-questions-later philosophy anymore. Time and experience had taught her to be more discerning and less prejudicial, but only to a point. Lorne's blood-red eyes alone would have kept her unnerved and her first curled firmly around her stake in most other circumstances.

However, she had to concede that once he opened his mouth and started talking, it was hard to find the fear. His voice was kind and his eyes, freaky though they were, had a softness to them she wasn't sure

she would have trusted were it not for the fact that Wesley had vouched for him.

"All right, darling, Wes has told me that you're considering making a deal with the big bad wolf," Lorne said, strolling back to her once he had a cocktail firmly in hand. "Glad you agreed to see me before you sell something you can't rebuy. Did he tell you how this works?"

Buffy worried a lip between her teeth, cast what was clearly the stage a furtive glance.

"Oh, don't be shy. We get all kinds here at Caritas." He threw back a healthy swallow of his drink, then eyed Spike. "If you're nervous, ask your platinum poodle to take first crack at the mic. Something tells me he has a killer set of pipes."

"Oi," Spike snapped, "we're here for the lady. Not doin' a bloody song and dance."

Lorne rolled his eyes, took another big drink, and threw an arm around Buffy's shoulders. "I should've made this stronger. It's *way* too early for divas," he muttered. "Okay, Buffy—it is Buffy, isn't it? If it were business hours, we'd do this whole big production. Lights, props, musical accompaniment, the whole shebang. But it's *not* business hours so there's no need to pull out all the stops. Just sing a few lines of 'Over the Rainbow' for Uncle Lorne and I should be able to tell you what you need to know."

It took a few seconds of standing there and blinking like an idiot before his words penetrated the fog surrounding her mind. Then she let out a long breath and the tension that had ridden with her to Los Angeles uncoiled. "Here I was worrying over what to sing and how I'd sound," she said with a shaky laugh.

The demon with the blood-red eyes and horns gave her a smile, one that had the last of her reservations fading away. "The *what* doesn't matter, sugar." He squeezed her shoulder, and she found the gesture oddly comforting. "Whenever you're ready, feel free to take my breath away."

Buffy nodded as he released her, mentally dredging up the lyrics to the song he'd suggested. Despite her relief that a full performance wasn't necessary, she couldn't say all the stage fright was gone. She didn't break out her singing voice all that often—unless shower

concerts counted—and never in front of other people. Somehow, though, she managed to convince her mouth to open and coax something that was not regular speech to come through. Her pitchy, imperfect voice filled the otherwise still air, taking the shape of words she had sung a thousand times as a child—Judy Garland's ultimate backup in the ultimate song of longing for adventure and escape, for the freedom that came with being somewhere else and ignorance of not knowing what waited on the other side. Fear and uncertainty and more besides, connections forged with people who were mirrors of those she'd left behind. And before she knew what was happening, her throat had grown tight and her eyes were filling with stupid tears.

"Hey there." Lorne stepped forward and pulled a handkerchief out of his bathrobe pocket. She would have laughed—whatever else, she had not expected him to have one on hand—if she weren't trying to rein in her sudden crying jag. "It's all right," he said, dabbing at her cheeks. "Woof, you've been through the wringer, haven't you?"

"Sorry." She shook her head. "I didn't mean to totally lose it on you."

"That's not what I'd call losing it, kitten, though based on what I saw, I wouldn't blame you one iota if you bawled your little head off." He gave her face another swipe with his handkerchief. "You are doing *so* good. Give yourself a little credit every now and then, okay? This whole 'being ripped from paradise' thing was never gonna be easy. You did what you did to survive. There is no shame in that."

If his intention was to get her to stop crying, he had failed miserably.

"All that worry and pain stuffed inside such a teeny package." Lorne patted her back with the hand holding the cocktail, ice and liquid sloshing against glass, and stuffed the handkerchief back into his pocket with the other. "I can't say the road back'll be easy, but it's *there,* honey. All you gotta do is get on it. And the best news? There's no reason not to click your heels and say those five magic words. So go in and sign that deal with your head held high. You'll end up where you need to be to make it the rest of the way."

A gulp of air startled out of her lungs almost hard enough to hurt. She didn't realize until that moment just how much she had been

prepared to hear the opposite. Not only that it was a bad idea, this whole thing, but a stupidly bad idea, and how had she let herself get so obviously snowed? And then she would be stuck, damned no matter which way she looked, tied either to her mistakes or her duty with nothing in between.

"Really?" she managed, her voice a scratchy whisper. "It's...it's not going to be bad?"

He shook his head, gave her another squeeze, then moved around her and back toward the bar. "Not saying our favorite group of morally dubious lawyers is being entirely straight with you," he noted, placed his drink on the counter and plucked out a napkin. "Because they're not. Which is why, before you make your appointment, you need to visit one of my many fabulous associates. Nothing serious," he rushed to add, having looked up in time to catch her expression. "Franky's a magician behind the bar. In front of it, just a regular old warlock, but one who can make a mean tonic that will knock your socks off. Or, in this case, make sure they stay on."

That made the sort of sense that didn't. Buffy exchanged a glance with Spike and was slightly mollified to see a frown on his face. "So... I'll still have kids?"

Lorne paused, looked up from where he'd been scribbling something on the napkin. "What? Oh! No, darling. Not that. Although, funny story..." He polished off his drink and left the glass on the bar when he started back toward her. "That prophecy they think they're dodging? Nothing to do with actual babies, baby, which will be really, really apparent here in a couple of years. No, I'm talking about their little reset."

None of what he had just said made sense. Buffy blinked up into his face before looking at the napkin as he pressed it into her hand. "Huh?"

"I believe Ms. Morgan called it a *complete* reset. And oh honey, did she ever mean it." He made a gesture as though to take a drink, but being that he'd left his on the counter, ended up with a mouthful of nothing. Lorne glared at his empty hand for a long second, perhaps trying to will a cocktail into it, then shook his head and refocused on her. "You go back to the moment when you made the wishes, you

go *all* the way back." He tapped his green fingers against her temples. "Having a piece of the Slayer is good—having a piece of the Slayer that she isn't aware is missing? Even better. You go see Franky, tell him to make one of his specials and put it on my tab. And you be sure to drink every drop if you want your best and only souvenir to make the return trip."

Buffy held his gaze, exhausted from the peaks and valleys she'd been dragged across over the last few minutes, then back down to the napkin he'd given her. It didn't take long for his meaning to click. "My memories. They mean to send me back...so I don't remember any of this?"

"Don't take it personally, sugar. They wouldn't be Wolfram and Hart if they didn't try to sneak in something in the fine print. Lucky for you, you had the good sense to listen to Wes when he told you to come see me."

Another hard breath whooshed out and Buffy backed up a step on legs that had started to shake. "Oh god."

She might have lost it all. Every bit of it. Would have, if she'd lost her nerve and decided that ignorance was indeed bliss. And when she returned... God, what then?

There was a lot that had happened over the past few days that she would just as soon forget—the hopelessness and despair, that awful morning at the crypt and the long walk back to her house. How the gun had felt in her hand, the weight of it, the cold certainty that she was living her last seconds and that she deserved it. Every pained thought about how she didn't measure up, how she wasn't enough, combined with the knowledge of what she had inside of her. The capacity to do terrible things to herself and the people she loved. That she could, in fact, channel the worst parts of her father if pushed far enough. If desperate enough.

But as terrible as that had been, as difficult as it was to carry each day, to lose it would be to lose everything.

Everything.

Buffy sniffed again, wiped at her eyes, and looked at Spike. Saw that he knew, was thinking the same thing. And when he smiled at her, she knew it too.

"We better go," she said, dragging her hands under her eyes again. "Our appointment's at two and it can take forever to get places in this city. Especially if we have a stop to make." She turned back to Lorne but fumbled whatever she had wanted to say the second those blood-red eyes were on her. Not even sure where to begin in a situation like this. When he'd saved her from something she hadn't realized had been a threat. "I... Do we pay you?"

She winced the second the words were out. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Talents include slaying vampires, creating universes, and not knowing how to say 'thank you.'*

Fortunately, he seemed to find this funny. Maybe he still had a line to her brain. She hoped so. It would save her the trouble of trying to verbalize all that gratitude.

"Typically, yes, but this one's on the house." Lorne winked, and she relaxed, even grinned a little at herself. "You just give the me in your dimension a ring-a-ding-ding if you ever make it this way and we'll settle up. Tell me I sent you. I'll know what it means."

"You will?"

"Well, probably not, but hey, it'll definitely grab my attention." The demon and nodded to the door, then slid his gaze over to Spike. "You sure you don't want a little preview now that you've seen how it works? You're wound tighter than a two-dollar watch."

Spike hadn't made to leave—hadn't moved at all, in fact, rather remained rooted to the spot, his gaze on the floor. That he hadn't immediately leaped to perform and answer the question she knew had consumed him since the offer both surprised her and didn't. Like her, Spike hadn't come here expecting to receive any kind of good news, had been living for the comfort that came with certain types of uncertainty. There was peace in the not knowing.

But that peace was a lie, and he understood that just as well as she had.

"Right." Spike nodded, shook out his shoulders as though preparing for a sprint. "Let's have it, then."

And he started singing, triggering a memory she hadn't realized she'd managed to carry with her from Heaven. He didn't get far into the song—she didn't think—but when he'd repeated the line, "I wanna

be sedated," for the second time, the rest clicked into place. Sitting in his car, hyper-alert to every move he made, the way he sat, the looks he shot her way, the flask he'd offered up to her great disgust. The song he'd started to sing.

It was such a stupid thing to remember, especially in the light of everything else she'd forgotten. Still, Buffy couldn't help but grin, thinking about the Spike who had tricked her into a date. The one who was waiting for her on the other side of this contract even if he didn't know it yet, and everything she had to tell him.

"Well?" Spike barked almost the second he stopped singing. "Let's hear it. The girl gonna hate me?"

Buffy snapped back to herself and looked to Lorne, holding her breath. She wasn't ashamed to admit to being a bit alarmed that the answer wasn't immediate. Whereas with her, the empathy demon had been quick to offer his reassurances, he now had a frown on his face, his yellow-tipped finger rubbing along his bottom lip.

"I think," he said slowly, gaze fixed on the floor, "that if you're *that* eager to leave before Wes brings a certain former-slash-soon-to-be vampire in for his Caritas debut, you better go now." A pause, then he looked at Spike directly and grinned. "Also, and I say this with—well, not with love, I don't know you well enough for that. We'll say with the warmest possible regards from a demon you've just met. Honey-child, you worry too much."

THE GOOD NEWS was the extra stop afforded Buffy very little time to reflect on what would happen after she walked through the doors at Wolfram and Hart. There was finding the place—Franky's Apothecary—rousing the titular Franky out of bed and imploring him to make the tonic Lorne had sent them to secure. Franky hadn't been too accommodating at first, complaining about how Lorne knew not to send anyone his way before nightfall—what self-respecting warlock rose with the sun?—and that they could wait for business hours. Obviously, that hadn't been an option, so Buffy had switched tactics.

"I need it for an appointment with Wolfram and Hart," she'd said,

hoping that name-dropping the city's most infamous evil law firm would convince Franky to get moving in ways that begging and threats from her traveling companion hadn't managed.

It had. He'd gone white—or as white as a purple-skinned demon could—uttered a thousand apologies and leaped into motion. Barely a quarter of an hour had passed before he'd had the concoction whipped up and ready to drink.

The tonic itself had tasted of raspberry and mint and, according to Franky, needed about a half hour to take full effect. He'd tried to explain how it worked though she still wasn't sure she understood fully—something about seeping into the metaphysical part of the mind, where she stored all the crucial components that made up Buffy Summers. The crucial components, in this case, being her memories, for they were what truly shaped a person. Once the tonic had settled, it would form a shield around those memories—one that not even the deepest magicks could penetrate. The effects would last for forty-eight hours and he didn't recommend taking the tonic more than once every two months, though for reasons he'd declined to elaborate.

Not that it mattered. She didn't need forty-eight hours. By the time she'd thrown back the concoction, she'd barely needed forty-five minutes.

Accessing Wolfram and Hart likewise turned out to be a chore—not because it was hard to find or anything, but there was a definitive lack of shady spaces to accommodate visitors with severe sun allergies. After looping the parking options twice and with the clock ticking ever closer to their meeting time, Spike eventually snarled and pulled into perhaps the sunniest of all available spots and threw the car into park.

"Closest we can manage, love," he said, anticipating her protest and already midway through the awkward jerking and twisting required to pull off his duster without getting out of the car. "Got some change for the meter, too. Might be more in the glove compartment."

"I got it," she said, digging through her purse. She was a bit surprised that feeding the meter was a concern at all, though it wouldn't do to be a vampire stranded in LA because his car had been towed off.

"Bloody bitch could've at least gotten us a garage or summat," Spike grumbled. "I know I'm not the first bloodsucker to do business with 'em."

Yeah, so did Buffy. There was at least one other—the one Angel had shoved out a window. "You can wait here," she offered. "I'm sure someone would—"

"Bugger. That." Spike tugged the newly liberated duster over his head. "First face she sees is gonna be mine."

There was no arguing with him, especially knowing it was exactly what Buffy would want were she the one to be unceremoniously ripped back to her home dimension.

So after she'd fed the meter every silver coin she could locate, she and Spike made the mad dash together, darting between pedestrians and important-looking people carrying briefcases, over the sidewalk, around the fountain, and into the ornate lobby of the law offices of Wolfram and Hart. It was a testament to how much otherworldly business was conducted here that no one so much as screamed when Spike burst in, smoking and cursing up a storm, nor when he whipped off his duster and tossed it to the floor for the familiar post-sun-fun-run routine.

"I tell you, my coat takes any more damage and I'm bloody suing," he said, stamping out the small flames with gusto. "Antique, this is."

Buffy watched, both him and the people making their way through the lobby. How none seemed particularly bothered by the ruckus. They hadn't so much as been shushed. Then she lifted her gaze to the large glass doors they had just come through and found herself planning the best course back to the car. Wondering if the shadows would have lengthened enough to provide adequate cover by the time they left and if she might be able to talk Spike into letting her scout for better routes before he braved the sun again.

Until she remembered that she wouldn't be here then. That these moments with him—this version of him—were her last.

Thankfully, before the thought could settle, her eyes landed on a familiar face. Two of them, actually, approaching from the reception area.

Good. She didn't want to think about goodbye until it was time to say it.

"The staff has already phoned upstairs to inform Lilah of our arrival," Wesley said by way of greeting. "We were told to wait as final adjustments were made."

Buffy nodded. "So I don't need to check in or anything?"

Wesley tossed Spike a rather pointed look. "I daresay your arrival is not news."

Right. Just because the evil law firm employees hadn't reacted didn't mean they hadn't noticed.

"How did we beat you here?" Angel asked, his tone light but almost accusatory, like he suspected they had parked somewhere to sneak in a quickie. "We were late getting to Caritas since we dropped Willow off at the Angel Investigations offices first, but we came here straight after and I know you had a head start."

Until he'd mentioned her, Buffy had forgotten that Willow was part of the traveling party, and almost found herself asking why they'd bothered to drop her anywhere before her brain kicked into gear. If Wolfram and Hart didn't plan on including the soul as part of the package, it was probably best not to advertise that they had a backup waiting in the wings.

"We had a head start, plus an extra stop," Buffy said. "I take it your reading came with no red flags?"

Angel relaxed a bit and lifted a shoulder. "Nothing we didn't expect."

"The soul?"

"Not part of the deal," Wesley cut in as he finally managed to pull his attention off the Spike spectacle and focus on her. "No matter, though, we were prepared." And he held up a pair of some serious-looking handcuffs as though that explained everything.

"I really didn't peg you as the type," Buffy replied. She wasn't sure why she said it until Wesley's cheeks went red and Spike snickered from behind her.

"It, ahh, is to ensure that Angel is quite incapacitated before he is escorted to our premises."

"Escorted, huh?"

"We believe it's likely that Lilah knows we prepared a soul ritual," Angel said, eyeing the cuffs warily. "But it's also possible that she and the senior partners hoped Wes would wheel me into their offices and not realize we hadn't negotiated a soul in the deal until after I woke up."

"So how's it going to work? They turn you here and, what, just let Wes take you back?"

"Equipped with these." Wesley raised the cuffs and gave them a little wiggle. "Unbreakable by the wearer. Can only be opened by the person who secures them. Which will be me. Willow is ensuring she has all the necessary components to perform the restoration ritual. And very likely being recruited by Cordelia to assist her in wedding planning, though she swore she did not mind."

"At the office, is she?" Spike asked, sliding his duster back on. "Drop anythin' *else* off while you were there?"

Buffy thought that might have been a bit on the vague side and was thus surprised when Wesley nodded without needing elaboration.

"I managed to procure a rather valuable vault last year in service to a family of Rhy'nock demons in central Los Angeles," he replied. "Point of fact, they also gave me the cuffs." Once more, he jostled the cuffs as though they needed a reminder. It was an old-school Wesley thing to do, one that would have been annoying three years ago but Buffy somehow found endearing. "It operates in a similar way—only I can access its contents. In fact, if anyone else attempts to access it, they're in for quite the literal shock, as it's been charmed to respond only to my touch. Until recently, I hadn't had any use for it, but then Doyle insisted I hide the seating chart for the reception so Cordelia stops making adjustments."

"Guessin' you're tellin' me this very borin' story for a reason, mate."

Wesley opened his mouth to continue, then scowled. "Suffice to say, the *item* in question is tucked safely inside, where it will remain until we have something to test."

"Just remember you're givin' me and the lady a ring before you do," Spike said without missing a beat. And Buffy felt a cool rush of relief in turn. Entrusting the paw to Wesley had been, she believed, the right

call, but she was heartened to realize that Spike wasn't about to consider the matter settled.

If anyone would fight to stop the thing from being used, it was him. And this world's Buffy.

Who needed to truly be *this world's* again.

As though her thoughts had been broadcast, the air filled with the sharp click of heels that she just knew belonged to Lilah Morgan. And sure enough, Buffy whirled around just in time to see the smug lawyer in all her smug glory, flanked by a couple of stone-faced cronies in business suits, her expression one of unmuted victory.

That stupid smirk chased away the nerves that had started their familiar dance in a brilliant burst of intense dislike that Buffy was beginning to associate strictly with this lawyer bitch. At least this was the last time she would have to torture herself with Lilah's company.

"Ms. Summers," Lilah said, and nodded at the others. "Angel. Spike. And Mr. Wyndam-Pryce, it must be so refreshing to have the time available to play chaperone." She answered his frown with a grin then fixed her attention on Buffy. "I assume the vampire—that is *current* vampire—stays with you?"

Spike drew up at her left before she could think to formulate a reply, his cool fingers gliding along her palm then entangling with her own. He gave her hand a squeeze, slight but reassuring. "Yeah, I'm stayin' with my lady until the end," he replied. "Where's the kid?"

"Here with her father. He will surrender her once the paperwork is signed."

"I want to see her," Buffy blurted before she could stop herself. "Make sure she's okay."

"That is not advisable." Lilah held up a hand. "She is fine, Ms. Summers. More than fine, and by virtue of the fact that she never shuts up, I can also tell you she is quite eager to see you and your pet vampire."

"So take me to her."

Of all things, the lawyer looked impressed. "You really want to do that to Dawn? To the true Buffy Summers? Reunite her with the sister she hasn't seen, steal that moment the way you've stolen others?" She slid Spike a rather pointed look. "You certainly are greedy, Ms.

Summers. In another time, you might have made a hell of an addition here at Wolfram and Hart."

Spike tightened his grip on her hand and tugged her back before she could do something stupid, like break the bitch's nose. But god, she wanted to—both for that knowing gleam in her eye, the one that told her Lilah knew just how much her words had rankled, and the fact that she was right. That Buffy hadn't even thought that far ahead, what seeing Dawn would rob of this world's Buffy, never mind the confusion and pain it would undoubtedly cause her sister.

But the thought of not seeing her, of coming this far and walking away without setting eyes on her—knowing for sure that she was there and would be going home at the end of it—was damn near excruciating.

Buffy shook her head, gave a look to Spike to know she had control of herself, and forced herself to relax. "I want to see her. *Just* see her. I want to know she's actually here and she's okay. She doesn't have to see me—it's better that she doesn't until I... Until it's the other Buffy again." That was as close as she could get to admitting aloud that Lilah was right, but it was enough. It was a win for the lawyer and they both knew it.

"Hmm." Lilah eyed her up and down, that insufferable smirk back on her lips. "That can be arranged." She turned to the lackey on her right. "Lindsey has been sniffing around, trying to find ways to be useful. Call him down. Since he and Angel are such good friends, I'm sure he would love to be the one to go over the contract in detail, facilitate the signatures, and escort him to the head of our Transitional Department."

Transitional Department. God, they had to be evil to make a vampire turning sound boring.

Lilah offered a throaty laugh as though she'd heard the thought. "Ms. Summers," she said, "if you and your vampire would follow me, we'll get everyone where they need to be."

THE FIRST GLIMPSE of Dawn that Buffy had had in days took place on

the wrong side of a two-way mirror. She'd stood there for what felt like hours, watching as her sister moved about a rather banal waiting area, completely ignoring their father, who kept shooting furtive glances to the door. She wanted to ask how all of this had been orchestrated. What Hank had been told and how he had been convinced, or what the firm had over him that persuaded him to fall in line. There was so much she wanted to know, so many questions swarming in her head, and she would never have the answers. Like everything else this world had given her, the knowledge hurt.

At some point, an associate had knocked on the door, breaking the spell that seeing her sister had cast over her. Angel's contract was signed, he'd said, and the transition was underway. All that was left to do was the next part—the last part.

So Buffy had allowed Spike to tug her out of the room, away from Dawn, and down a hall to a room almost exactly like it. There was a long table surrounded by empty chairs, and at the head was a single piece of paper absolutely covered with tiny, nearly illegible print, and a pen.

She sat at the table—Spike standing just to her left, his hand on her shoulder—and forced herself to read every word. The air felt kinetic, pulsing with unseen energy—or perhaps that was just the thundering in her head. The knowledge that as soon as ink met paper, all of this would be gone. *She* would be gone.

She'd done everything she could to avoid thinking about it since they'd left that morning. There was no more avoiding. It was over.

And it was too much to be over.

Buffy got to the end of the contract. It was all there, just as had been described. She would return to the moment she'd made the wishes. The other Buffy would come here. Live under this skin again, occupy this space, resume her place in the life that had been stripped from her. And Buffy would never know what had happened in her world in the days she'd been gone. What the other Buffy had done, the revelations she'd had, if she and Spike had taken comfort in each other, how her sister had reacted. She would know none of it, and the other Buffy would know all of it. That bothered her, but only a little. It was a small concession to make to a woman from whom she'd taken so much.

She pressed her lips together, blinking at the signature line. One scrawl of her name. That was all that was left to do. Her thoughts scattered in a desperation to focus, dragging her back to Lorne, and the tonic she'd consumed, and everything about this time that was precious to her. The choice she'd made earlier to take all of that with her—the isolation and the pain and the endless self-doubt—because despite everything this world had done to break her, it had given her something wonderful too.

She placed the tip of the pen to the paper, her lower lip trembling, and craned her neck to gaze once last time at the vampire beside her. Managed to mouth the words, "I love you," but not what came next. The promise, the knowledge, that she would see him again soon. Just not this him. A him that would be entirely hers in ways he never could have been.

Still, it was hard. Saying goodbye always was.

Buffy inhaled deeply, forced herself to tear her eyes from his. Not waiting to see if he said it back, needing the next time she heard those words to be the start of something rather than the end.

So she refocused for the last time on the sheet in front of her, wiped her eyes with her free hand, and signed.

The lights went out.

28

IF YOU WROTE ME OFF I'D UNDERSTAND IT. 'CAUSE I'VE BEEN ON SOME OTHER PLANET

IT WAS DARK. A PITCH-BLACK SORT OF DARK THAT HAD HER SLAYER senses at immediate attention. Buffy shuddered, craned her neck around in the hopes of catching some wayward shard of light, but there was none. The urge to panic rose, that sense of endless suffocation that still followed her into her nightmares, but the air around her was open. Not only that, it smelled familiar. Tasted familiar too. A place she knew—a place that was safe.

And she was holding something.

Buffy glanced down—a reflex and nothing more, since she couldn't see anything—and squeezed the thing in her hand just enough to feel its frailty, tracing her thumb over its contours. There was the rough, wrinkled skin of a palm, the narrow, fur-lined bones that curled into a closed fist. It felt familiar, almost comforting—seductive in the way the dark was seductive. She'd only held it once before, *this* once, other glimpses having been stolen while it was nestled safely inside its case, but she would know it anywhere. Its weight, its coarse fur—and perhaps it was her imagination, but she thought she could feel its power too. A muted heartbeat cadencing in rhythm against her palm.

She was in the basement of the Magic Box and she was holding the monkey's paw. But she hadn't been just a second ago. Just a second ago,

she'd been in a conference room with a long table. There had been a pen and a sheet of paper with tiny printing. A contract. And Spike.

It was the second of disorientation—she hadn't known exactly what to expect or how it would feel, but opening the door to that memory triggered an avalanche of others. Standing in the basement of another Magic Box, one so much like this one but not, surrounded by towering shelves and boxes and crates, making her way to the stairs and turning on the light. Going home and finding Angel on the sofa. Arguing with him, not knowing why. Needing Giles but not finding him. Pushing inside the Bronze in search of familiarity, finding people who looked and sounded like her friends but didn't know her at all. Spike dragging her into a closet. And then more. So much more. There had been hours of conversations, nights spent at the crypt, the mornings of him rubbing himself against her, Anya telling her she was stuck, Buffy trying to force Spike to love her, Buffy sitting in her bedroom with a gun in her lap, Buffy in an alley deciding to live, Buffy realizing she was in love with Spike, Buffy *being* loved by Spike, and then saying goodbye.

It was all there—every second. Whatever Lorne's contact had given her had done the trick.

Buffy released a slow, shuddering breath, her chest going tight. The monkey's paw was in her hand, its fingers balled so it formed a fist. She remembered those fingers curling in as she'd spoken. The slow, unearthly way flesh and bone had moved, how she'd watched with excitement, tingling with possibility and promise. But this moment was after that moment, after she'd made the final wish. It was as Lilah had said.

She didn't realize she was crying until she inhaled again and heard how harsh her breath sounded against the still air. How full it was. How there seemed to be something in her throat. She knew she should move, *needed* to move. Needed to put the paw away. It was dangerous, even now. Even knowing what she did, it had the power to convince her that the gamble was worth it. She wondered if Giles had any of the antidote on hand, then cried harder when she realized that she could ask him. She could go upstairs and ask Giles about the paw and the antidote and whatever else she wanted to ask because he was here,

alive, and she was here too. She was back in a world where Giles lived. A world where she could run to her sister's school right now, burst into her class and find her sitting behind her desk. The need to do that crashed over her with such intensity it became a physical ache. She would run to her and hug her and hug her and hug her and never let go.

And Spike. She needed to see Spike. The man she loved.

God, there was so much to tell him. So much to tell all of them. So much they wouldn't understand, might not even believe because they wouldn't remember. Whatever days had been spent here with another Buffy were gone. All reset—the way Angel had once reset a day in her life. And it hadn't been remarkable for her. She'd stood there trying to get him to emote, and a demon had crashed through the window. Angel had killed the demon and Buffy had left. Only that wasn't what had happened at all. There had been a whole day lived that he'd erased. She knew that now even if it was hard to imagine, and it would be the same way with her friends. With Dawn. With Spike.

Spike. Was he reuniting with the other Buffy now? Holding her to him? Crying as hard as she was? Shoving the letter she'd left behind into her hands and demanding that she read it *right bloody now*? The image startled a laugh out of her, one that sounded harsh and wrong against her sobs, which only made her laugh harder and harder until stopping seemed impossible.

That was how Anya found her however-many minutes later. The light came on, sudden and blinding, and her name rang through the air.

"Buffy? The customer is getting impatient and—what's going on?"

But Buffy couldn't answer. She'd fallen to her knees, one hand braced on her thigh, the monkey's paw clutched in the other, laughing and crying and laughing some more. She knew her face was a mess, could feel her makeup running, her hair falling out of the ponytail she'd apparently been wearing the day she'd made the wishes. Her chest ached and her lungs begged for a break, but she couldn't stop. Not even at the look on Anya's face, something between bemusement and horror. If anything, seeing that only made everything seem funnier.

"You've snapped," Anya decided a moment later, her tone frank and observational as ever. "I warned Xander this could happen. Spend any

amount of time in a hell dimension and it's no guarantee that you won't lose your marbles when—what are you holding?"

Buffy bit down on her lower lip to keep her laughter inside and raised the monkey's paw. She nearly lost it again when Anya's eyes went wide.

"That is not for sale. How did you even get that out of the case?" The former demon sighed, trundled over, and snatched the paw from her fingers. "Giles needs to not keep his personal collection at the shop. His junk takes up valuable real estate for items that customers can actually buy." Anya plucked something else off the floor—the case, Buffy realized—and tucked the paw back inside without so much as batting an eye. She started toward the shelf, then hesitated. "You didn't happen to make any wishes, did you?"

At last, the laughter started to abate, leaving Buffy with a sore throat and a stitch in her side. It took a moment but she managed to pull herself off the floor and onto shaky legs, her face still wet and her mouth a bit sore from having spent a prolonged time stretched into a lunatic cackle. "That's...complicated."

"It's not complicated. It's a simple yes or no," Anya replied, her tone even. "This is wish-magic. I know how badly wish-magic can go. Giles only has it so he can destroy it."

"But there's only one way to destroy it."

"Yes, as I've explained to him, but you know Giles. He won't be satisfied until—" She frowned, narrowing her eyes. "How do you know that?"

Buffy snorted another laugh, this one dry and without the hysterical edge. "I think I might be the monkey paw expert now. Do you know if he keeps the antidote?"

"Antidote?"

"Yeah. I've handled it so I'll need the antidote. Some sort of stuff to spread across my forehead." She shot the thing a lingering look. "I bet he has it."

"What are you talking about? I have never heard of a monkey paw antidote."

"That's because you never had to worry about it as a vengeance demon. You're immune to it. Even as a human, apparently." Buffy

looked around, taking in her surroundings for the first time since the lights had come on. The stacks of inventory, the open spaces, the piles of organized chaos scattered throughout. Not a ton of space to move but space enough, and virtually unrecognizable from the basement tucked under an identical Magic Box in a world she would never visit again.

"The mummy hand," Buffy said suddenly, whipping her head around. "It keeps trying to kill me. I think it's defective."

Anya looked her up and down, taking in her wrinkled clothes and crazy hair and the mess that was undoubtedly her face. Hell, Buffy couldn't even begin to conceptualize how she must look right now. How any of this must look.

"And you found that funny?" the former demon finally asked.

She lifted a shoulder. "You had to be there?"

"I, for one, do not find defective merchandise amusing." Anya glanced down to the monkey's paw case, sighed, and shelved it much as she had what felt like a lifetime ago right between a worn, haunted-looking doll and a naked demon lady statuette. "Especially exotic import items. I very much hope you're wrong."

Buffy, of course, was not wrong. She watched instead with mild amusement as Anya paraded over to the box where the mummy hand was stashed, threw the lid open, then immediately shrieked and leaped back as the bandaged thing sprang out in full force, making grasping motions in the direction of her throat.

"Dammit!" Anya huffed after running the hand through with a blade. "I am *not* losing a sale over this. Go tell her we'll put in an order for a new one. A better one. I told you we can ship anywhere in the country, so it'll go directly to her house. That way if it's also defective, we'll still have her money and it will be someone else's problem."

"You won't refund it if it tries to kill her?"

Anya motioned to the dead mummy hand, the blade handle—mother of pearl, perhaps?—sticking straight up from its back. "It's an issue with the supplier, not with us. No reason for me to pay for their mistake. If it tries to kill her, she can bother them." She sighed, then began shooing Buffy toward the stairs. "Go. Now. You've already spent far too much time down here and Giles refuses to let me sell that

woman anything and not selling things makes me antsy. Though maybe you should fix..." Anya paused again, waved a hand in front of her face. "You don't look customer service appropriate. But the insane rarely do."

Another laugh bubbled off Buffy's lips before she could help it, and she threw herself against Anya with such force they both nearly went toppling to the floor.

"What is this?" Anya asked, flailing her arms. "Buffy, are you—"

"I love you, Ahn," she said. Again, she felt herself welling with tears, though nothing about the situation seemed remotely funny now. The realization had hit her that she hadn't seen Anya since that night at Xander's condo, the night where the former demon had revealed the truth about the paw, stripped away her hope that they would be able to destroy it, all the while spitting things at her with such naked hostility that she'd almost been unrecognizable, but only almost. This wasn't an Anya who had been stewing in her resentment—it was *her* Anya. The Anya from Buffy's world because this *was* Buffy's world. She was home. "It's so good to see you."

"Umm, good to see you too." Anya had stopped flailing her arms but didn't seem to know what to do with them, so they hung rather limply at her sides. "Buffy, this might not be the best time, but under the circumstances I think it's appropriate that I tell you that Xander asked me to marry him and I said yes. There's a ring."

Buffy pulled back, nodding like mad. "That's wonderful."

"So...you understand why I can't love you back, right? I am very flattered and under different circumstances... Maybe if you had a penis—"

Another giggle broke through. She sniffed and wiped at her eyes. "Thanks. That means a lot."

Anya backed up a few steps, regarding her the way she might a wild animal she thought likely to attack. "Well. Good. That's good. Now, about the woman upstairs? The world of retail is fast-paced and can be overwhelming. Nursing a broken heart while trying to make a sale might not lead to an optimal customer experience and if you really *do* love me, you know how important it is that no customer walks out of my shop without first visiting the cash register."

She nodded again and somehow killed another laugh. "I'll handle it."

There wasn't any place to stop and spruce up her makeup, so she settled for the quick check she always did when running late for a date thanks to a patrol gone long. Namely, wiping her cheeks, pulling her hair free of the tie and fluffing it out, giving her outfit a once-over to make sure there weren't any obvious stains. Unlike a post-patrol polish, though, she had the distinct feeling that she was making the situation worse. Oh well. If the loop started again, at least she'd get the wrinkles out of her skirt and her face would likely lose its post-crying jag puffiness. A silver lining to every curse. That would be her motto from this point on.

The loop, however, did not restart, and somehow Buffy made it through the next few minutes without losing her composure. Not when she stepped into the shop proper, saw it filled with light and life, its tables and shelves stacked high with all the merchandise she'd spent the better part of the past week surfing through downstairs. Not even when she saw Giles tucked close to a bookcase, absently flipping through one of the many tomes he'd dragged out to help solve her latest crisis, his brow furrowed and his eyes a thousand miles away. The urge to deviate from her current course and tackle her watcher into a hug that would likely bruise his ribs was nearly unbearable, but she bore it. Walked straight to the customer—the woman whose screwy shopping list had started this whole thing—and explained about the defective hand. That it had already been activated by...well, she didn't know what but they could order a new hand, a better hand, and have it shipped directly to her home address.

"Are you quite sure?" the woman asked. Buffy had forgotten that the woman was British and had to fight another misplaced gigglefit—why, she didn't know. Nothing funny about the accent except it wasn't the way it had been in her memory. Everything here was so familiar and new at the same time.

"Way with the sure." Buffy motioned to herself. "I wrestled with it and it wrestled back."

"You *do* look a bit peaky."

She had absolutely no idea what that meant, but it sounded like it

might be in her favor so she nodded. "Make that massively peaky. And it's against store policy to sell items that we think might try to strangle the customer. Not the best way to get repeat business. If you'll follow me over to the register, I'll get another hand ordered right up for you."

And that was exactly what happened. The woman followed Buffy over to the cash wrap, where sat Anya's three-ring binder stuffed full of helpful first-day-on-the-job instructions. She stuck to the guidelines for placing special orders, took the woman's credit card, entered the shipping address, and rang up the sale. It was all so simple. Tidy, even. This thing that had worn her down just a few days ago, left her feeling abandoned and defeated, was over without a fight.

Though Buffy didn't let herself believe that fully until the shop bell tinkled as the woman left. Even then, she didn't move right away, rather listened for the unmistakable sounds of life moving in the right direction.

A gust of wind. The hum of a passing car. Distant laughter from people on the crosswalk. No more bell. No more customer.

"Good job, Buffy," Anya said, rounding the corner with a brilliant smile. "Now, I would recommend skipping the meltdown in the basement next time. Oh, and if you can try to promote one of the add-on items by the register, even better. You'd be surprised by how much we make on suggestion alone. And speaking of suggestions, you might want to visit the bathroom and fix your face."

Buffy nodded dazedly, still trying to grapple with the reality of what had just happened. It already seemed like a long time had passed since the crying jag and the laughing fit downstairs. The fact that Giles was standing so close hit her again as she hadn't been able to let it before, and she slowly pulled her gaze from Anya's smiling, expectant face to allow herself the privilege of seeing with her own eyes that her watcher was alive and well.

He was hunched over the table-full of books—books she remembered he'd pulled out to research the time anomaly she'd experienced on campus approximately a million years ago, to see if there was any possibility it was related to the demon that had attacked her at Xander's worksite. The problems of a Buffy buried so far in her past

they seemed more likely to belong to someone else, yet still also fresh enough—despite everything—that it also felt good and right.

Perhaps feeling the weight of her stare, Giles shifted slightly before lifting his head to meet her eyes and flash a gentle, reassuring smile. The standard atta-girl she was used to getting from him whenever she'd accomplished a mundane task that he felt was as beneath her as she did. Only she must have looked like hell run over, no matter her attempts to school herself back into something more composed, for he rushed over the next second with eyes full of concern.

"Buffy, are you quite well?" he asked. "You look a little... Well, overwhelmed."

"The term 'drowned rat' comes to mind," Anya said helpfully.

"The lady told me I was peaky," Buffy heard herself say. And that was as much as she got out before the tidal wave hit and she went down for the count. The reality that was looking at Giles, seeing him standing in front of her when he'd been dead not that long ago. When, had she wanted to see him, ask him something, hear his voice, she would have been out of luck because a plane had gone down and he'd been on it. But it wasn't just Giles—the Magic Box was open, its wares out on display, and Anya was talking to her. Talking to her and not hating her. And elsewhere in this big, wonderful world that was hers, her sister was sitting in class, likely watching the minute hand inch ever-closer to three o'clock. Buffy was here, everyone was here, and it was all hers.

When she broke down this time, it wasn't bittersweet. She wasn't thinking about what she'd left behind at all. It was all good, all pure giddy goodness that came with the reality of being home. Of standing in a world and knowing her place in it, knowing full well that she was the Buffy that belonged there, that no one would look at her and wish they saw someone else. She heard Giles shout something—what, she couldn't say—heard Anya shout back, equally bewildered, and she wanted to laugh but couldn't this time. There was just too much to get out—too much of that open, wondrous relief.

It would be hard, whatever came next, but it would also be hers. Every bit of it.

"Giles," Buffy gasped at last, her lungs once again clamoring for air,

the stitch in her side even stitchier than before—her entire body rebelling at being thrown back into those tumultuous emotions when she'd just gotten herself out. She sniffed and wiped uselessly at her eyes, and Giles was there, not quite holding her but standing near enough that he could catch her should she fall. The way he always had been. The thought nearly made her lose her composure all over again. "When I was downstairs, I handled the monkey paw."

The words had the exact impact she had expected. His eyes went wide and he stumbled back as though she had come at him swinging. "You handled... Buffy, how did you even get into the case? I—"

"Warded it. I know." She flashed a watery smile. "Turns out wards have nothing on determined evil monkey parts. Please tell me you have the antidote."

"Of course I do." Giles leaped into action, moving faster than she could remember seeing him move. He didn't even bother to slow down to ask how it was she knew there was an antidote—which would have been her first question—instead disappeared around the corner. Then the basement door thudded hard against the wall, and Buffy listened as he stomped his way downstairs and proceeded, from the sound of things, to run into every shelf and rack there was to run into. By the time he made it back, his hair was askew, and he was panting and red-faced as though he'd braved an obstacle course. But he didn't slow down at all, rather made a beeline toward her, eyes set and determined.

"Did you use it?" he asked, wrestling with the vial until the stopper came out, then gasping and cursing as the contents sloshed over the side. "Buffy, that paw is—"

"I know," she said, taking his wrist before he could do any more damage. Would be just her luck if he spilled the whole batch—she wasn't sure how easy this stuff was to come by. "It's okay. It's only been a few minutes."

"That might be enough time for it to seize hold of your faculties and distort your judgment. I haven't—"

"It's not distorting anything. Not yet, anyway." She pried the antidote vial from his trembling fingers, dabbed a healthy amount onto her own, then spread it across her brow. The effect was instantaneous and impossible to miss, though perhaps only because she now knew to

expect it. There was a clean break. A snap. Whatever hold the paw had started to forge was gone just like that, noticeable only in its absence.

"How do you know to do that?" Giles asked, but in such a way she could tell he didn't really want the answer. "How—how did you even know there was an antidote? Or why you would need to ask for one? This is quite serious. The time aberration you experienced on campus, the demon attack—"

"Completely separate, nothing to do with the paw."

"How can you know *that*? You didn't know I had it. I wouldn't have thought you even knew what it was."

"Well, I do." Buffy stuffed the stopper back into place, trying to think of how to say this—say any of it. Knowing him as she did and how he would react. Of all the things she and Spike had discussed regarding her return, somehow she'd not considered how to have this conversation. "We should probably get more of this," she said, waving the vial. "Just in case."

"Buffy—"

"I used it." She spoke in such a rush she wasn't sure if Giles heard her at first, hoped that maybe he hadn't. That she could skip the part where he wigged out and started yelling or muttering or wiping his glasses.

But Giles knew her too well for that. His face fell slack, his eyes widening with horror.

"It's done. Or it *was* done. Now I guess it's *un*done. Or something like that. It's a long story. And I know. I promise, if anyone doesn't need a crash course in monkey paw consequences, it's me. They are terrible, awful, no good, very bad."

"You can't *possibly* know—"

"But I do. See for you, it's been about ninety seconds since you saw me last. For me, it's been a few days. Maybe a week. I dunno. It all kind of blurs together." None of the words she needed were coming. God, she had no idea how to begin to explain what she'd been through. "Giles...I made wishes and I went somewhere else. A whole different Sunnydale. Where you were dead and the Magic Box was closed, and I was married to Angel but it was bad. And Dawn was gone—Angel sent her to my dad after I died. Anya hated me because

you left me the shop, but I was legally dead and couldn't do anything with it."

The look she earned was no less than what she'd expected. Blank at first, then with slow, dawning comprehension of the words themselves—the words that would make sense on their own, perhaps even strung together, even if their meaning did not. And she couldn't begrudge him his confusion or his disbelief—or Anya hers, who was also looking at her with open skepticism—for she knew how it sounded. How it would have to sound to a Giles who had seen her just a few minutes ago when everything had been calm and normal. Their version of normal, at least. The sort with time aberrations and demon attacks, not entire parallel universes.

"You were dead because of me," she went on. It was all she could do. Talk until he understood she was telling the truth. "Because of a wish I made. Dawn was gone because of a wish I made, too. And Angel...also a wish I made. Angel was human and our marriage was just...awful. He resented me and I was in love with Spike. We were having an affair."

"Good lord."

She didn't know which part he was *good lording* and wasn't brave enough to ask. Just soldiered on.

"I thought I was going to be trapped there forever. Anya"—she cut her gaze to the former demon—"the Anya over there—told me about the Promethean Flame and how it was the only thing that could destroy the paw. I know you bought the paw from a man named Singer who lives near Vegas. You tried to contact him, warn him about using it but he didn't listen. He just wanted to bring back his wife."

The flush from Giles's race downstairs had all but drained away. "Bloody hell, Buffy."

"I'm guessing here he got in touch with you. By that time, over there, though, you were gone." Renewed tears pricked at her but somehow, she kept them at bay. "We looked and looked for ways to switch back and...there just weren't any. But Wolfram and Hart..." She trailed off, waiting for him to leap in with more reprimands or questions or just general Giles-level freakout. He didn't. He did stiffen in such a way she knew he was thinking things, and that sooner or later she'd hear

what they were. "Wolfram and Hart made me an offer," she said. "And I took it. They sent me back to the moment I made the wishes."

Buffy held his gaze, sensing she was on the brink of saying too much—not that there wasn't more he needed to know, but that unloading it all now would be overkill. The wishes that had caused all this, the intense need to justify them, even with the reassurances that the paw's hold on her had been at least somewhat to blame. She wanted to talk about the day Angel had turned back and how miserable their marriage had been, about Giles's estate planning—did he really intend for her to have the Magic Box?—and her dad's relationship with Wolfram and Hart, the details of the deal she'd made and more than that. There was so much, and she was eager to share all of it.

But there was time for that. Time and more—he wasn't the only one who needed to hear it. So for now, she let go of explanations that could wait. There were other things that couldn't. "I really, really missed you."

The hardness, the worry and concern, in Giles's face melted without ceremony and in the next instant, she was in his arms, in that warm and familiar place. His strong heartbeat thumping in her ear, his Gilesy scent filling her nostrils, and he was here, alive, and so was she.

"Whatever happened, Buffy, we'll handle it," he told her, all warmth and reassurance, rubbing her back in that comforting way of his. "I'm just glad you're all right."

There was nothing left to handle, but she sensed he needed something to say and that was as good as anything for right now, so she didn't argue. It was enough that he was there, that she could confound him one second and hug him the next. That she could tell him the rest once the truth of what she'd experienced had a chance to settle and he started firing off questions, for she knew that was coming.

"Does this mean," Anya asked in a low voice, "that you're *not* in love with me?"

Buffy broke away from her watcher with a giggle, wiping away the few stray tears that had, despite her best efforts, slid free. "Sorry, Ahn."

"Oh, poo. I was looking forward to the moment where the Jesus

man asks if anyone objects." She crossed her arms and indeed did seem quite put out. "I thought you and Xander could fight over me. Obviously, you'd have to pretend to lose, but it would be very romantic. A way to show my demon guests that my man is worthy of me."

Giles blinked, his brow furrowing. "You and Xander are getting married?"

"Well, technically we aren't telling people just yet but...oops?" She didn't look the least bit sorry, though, beaming a huge smile and rocking on her heels. "Oh! My ring! You absolutely *must* see my ring. You'll never believe what it appraised for. I certainly didn't. I've been dying to show it off."

Buffy caught Giles's gaze as Anya scurried behind the counter in search of her purse, caught the baffled amusement wrestling with the concerns he couldn't yet bury. She got that—she'd thrown a lot at him. There were questions he had, questions he *would* have but didn't yet, and all that spelled hours of conversation in her future. Conversation she would get to have with him and everyone, as well as a few arguments on the horizon.

But that was okay. That was being with the people she loved. That was being alive.

"You said *switch* a moment ago," Giles muttered, his voice barely audible over the sound of Anya's rooting through her things. "There is more you're not telling me, isn't there."

"A lot."

"Will you?"

"Yeah. But just wait until we're all together. I only want to say it twice."

"Twice?" He frowned. "Who else..."

But she saw the moment he understood.

"Spike," he said, his tone careful. Not neutral—that was hoping too much—but also not judgmental. More wary resignation than anything else. It was, perhaps, the best she could have asked for.

"Yeah."

"You were in love with him."

"Think your verb needs to be a bit more active there."

He swallowed. "I am going to need quite a lot of scotch when you do share the story in its entirety."

"That can be arranged."

IN THE END, she told them everything. Mostly.

And she started with Heaven.

Buffy hadn't made the decision consciously. It had just become clear as the day wore on—as she dodged questions from Dawn, who had been pleased but more than a little mystified to find her sister waiting for her outside the school, even more so when she'd been greeted by a rib-crushing hug—that none of what she would tell them would make sense without first touching upon what she'd lost. Because even with what she knew about the paw and how it worked, she also knew it hadn't been in her head from the start of the day. It hadn't trailed after her on the UC Sunnydale campus, reminding her of how far removed she was from those around her. It hadn't made her feel hunted at Xander's jobsite, unable to ever escape the pressure that was her calling even when keeping the house was on the line. And it definitely hadn't been in her room night after night, bombarding her with fears that she might wake up in her coffin all over again. The paw had just taken advantage of thoughts she was already having, feelings she couldn't shake, a life she hadn't wanted to live.

"I'm not okay," she'd told the room, trying not to squirm too much at the stunned silence that had followed her confession. Of all of them, Willow had been the hardest to look at, her saucer-sized eyes filling with tears, her skin pale and her mouth agape. "I'm better than I was, but... It's been hard. And I don't think I'm going to be okay for a while. But I want to be. I think I can be in time. But that's why I've been...just not good since you brought me back. I love you all so much but living here, after that—worrying all the time about everything... It's been a lot. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I thought it would be better if you didn't know, but that meant I had to pretend and doing that just made everything worse."

It turned out discussing the few days she'd spent in another Sunny-

dale was a piece of cake following the Heaven revelation. The only things she left out were what she'd done to Spike—that was something she doubted she would ever share with anyone but him—and what had nearly happened in the upstairs bedroom with Angel's gun. Everything else had just poured out of her, including what she knew about her marriage to Angel, that her wish for money had gotten Giles killed, how she'd felt ostracized among the Scoobies over there because she wasn't their Buffy. Hell, she even told them about the dreams she'd had about the other Buffy taking her place here, making them hope that she never found her way back because that Buffy was better. More stable and less broken, even if everything in her world was falling apart. She told them about the deal too, how easy the decision had been once it had been offered to her. When Giles made a sound like he meant to object, she told them about Wesley and his friend who had a knack for reading futures, and his reassurance that Wolfram and Hart wasn't gaining anything in the deal at all.

And she'd told them she was in love with Spike.

"It's not up for discussion," she'd said, looking most particularly at Xander, who had seemed on the cusp of launching into an impassioned speech. "I love him. And trust me when I say I wouldn't have ever made it back had he not been there with me."

Dawn, of course, had been beside herself with glee—started asking questions along the lines of, "Is he moving in? Will you guys take the big bedroom? Can we maybe build a place outside where he can smoke during the day? I so do *not* want that smell in the house." Her jubilation had been a boon in a room that had otherwise been a study in awkward stillness. Not to mention Dawn had gone to bat for Spike almost at once, shooting down the objections as they arose with finesse Buffy envied. It seemed she'd been sitting on her feelings for some time.

It wasn't going to be easy and she wouldn't fool herself into thinking otherwise. Before Xander had left, he'd pulled Buffy aside—Anya had been soaking in the oohs and ahhs over her engagement ring since that cat was officially out of the bag—to let her know that while he didn't get it and probably never would, he would try not to be hostile toward Spike going forward. Buffy supposed that was the best

she could hope for, though she had taken pleasure in telling him that the Xander in the other world had been tickled to learn that his Buffy had been with Spike after witnessing the disaster that was her marriage. That knowing she hadn't been entirely miserable, that she'd had someone she loved who loved her, had provided comfort.

Xander hadn't had a response to that. He'd just gaped at her, then grabbed Anya—mid-gush about the cut of her diamond—and pulled her out the door without another word.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur. There had been questions and there would be more, but thankfully everyone had listened when she'd said she was done for the night. Well, almost everyone. After Xander and Anya left, and Giles announced he was going out for a nightcap, Willow had sidled up to her with those wide, sad eyes brimming with guilt. She'd been steered away by Tara before she could tackle whatever excuse she'd been about to lay out, though Buffy knew she wouldn't be able to dodge it forever. Whatever Willow was feeling now was the same thing Buffy had felt on the walk to Revello Drive after Angel had caught her and Spike at the crypt—a rush to explain things that needed no explanation and would serve no purpose except to make her feel better about herself. Nothing could undo what had been done or the hurt that had been inflicted as a result. All she could do was live with her mistakes, uncomfortable as it was.

Buffy thought she might need that discomfort. And she was almost certain Willow did.

The knowledge that she would see Spike—*her* Spike—soon had been with her throughout the day, buried under giddiness and relief, alongside that bittersweet knowledge of everything she had left behind. Every few minutes, she found herself wondering about the Spike she had woken up beside that morning. If he and Buffy had made the return trip to Sunnydale with Dawn in the backseat, likely gabbing a mile a minute, allowing them very little time to do more than exchange long, meaningful looks. Or worried ones, on Spike's end. How Buffy would react to finding her life completely rearranged, her secrets no longer secret, her husband gone, the obstacles standing between her and the man she loved well and truly removed. If Spike would spend his night alone in the crypt or if he would be invited to

stay at Revello Drive. Perhaps not in the bed she'd shared with Angel but close enough.

How that Buffy would feel when she read the letter.

And how *her* Spike would feel when she told him all she had to tell him.

Despite her desire to head toward the crypt as soon as the conversation with the Scoobies concluded, though, Buffy knew she owed Dawn more than a quick brush-off so she could hop into bed with her vampire soon-to-be boyfriend. Something that Dawn herself drove home, however unwittingly, with the way her face lit up when Buffy suggested they order something tasty and spend the evening watching bad movies. Even movies with the dreaded R rating, as Dawn was more than old enough for blood, gore, and adult language.

They didn't end up watching much of what played out across the screen, though. What Dawn really wanted was to talk. Really talk. Like grownups. Like sisters.

"So," Dawn said, keeping her gaze locked on her mostly empty carton of chicken fried rice, "you're completely over Angel now?"

Buffy set her own carton on the coffee table, raising her gaze to the living room wall that—in the other world—was dominated by a large black and white photo snapped the day of their wedding. The one where one of their mother's favorite paintings hung now, over a desk that housed one of the lamps Spike had kept in the crypt. "Yeah," she said softly. "That feels very finished. It actually did when we met last week, too. That's one of the reasons I made the wish. I wasn't ready for it to be finished."

"He was just that bad, huh? As a human?"

She sighed, made a face. "I don't think he knew how to be human. And we definitely didn't know how to be together. Angel made mistakes—and lots of them—but so did I. Or the other me."

Dawn kept her focus on her carton. "Like cheating on him?"

"Wow. Straight for the throat."

"It wasn't you, though," she said quickly. "Not really. You didn't do that."

"No," Buffy replied, enjoying the familiar surge of empty vindication this thought brought with it. "It wasn't. But it also was. Every-

thing that's in her is in me, too." That and more than that. "Right situation, I guess. You can be pushed to become just about anything."

"I guess being alive again after everything makes that easier to see." Dawn directed her gaze to the food carton once more, then in a soft voice, like she didn't want to be heard, said, "Are you sad to be back? You can tell me if you are. I can handle it. This world is...hard and you were in Heaven."

There were loaded questions and then there were questions like this one, which were something beyond loaded. The temptation was there to give the standard *of course I want to be here*, but if the past few days had taught her anything, it was that uncomfortable truths were vastly superior to comfortable lies in the long run. Dawn had earned her honesty if nothing else.

"It's hard being back. It *has* been, at least." Dawn's face fell, as Buffy had known it would, so she hurried to say, "I'm not sad to be with you. Or the others. Or Spike. I think I can be happy. I *want* to be happy. I want to feel all the things I did before. It's already better now than it was before all this happened."

"Really?"

She nodded, not having to search hard to find a smile. "As awful as things were in that world, there was good too. What the other Buffy had with her Spike was more than good and I think—no, I know—it helped her when she came back. Spike told me that it was hard for her but she didn't go through it alone. If she can have that, then so can I. With him and you. It'll just take time."

Her sister offered a shaky nod, her lower lip wobbling a bit. "I really missed you, you know."

Buffy released a trembling breath, at once overcome by a wave of love so intense she nearly burst into tears. Softer emotions were not Dawn's forte. Anything that made her feel exposed and vulnerable was something she ran away from. Anger and hostility were easier, both defensive and combative, so if she was hurt at least it was always something she could see coming. Part of that was being a teenager, part was being the Slayer's younger sister, all of it was both. Buffy had a vague memory of Dawn standing with her on the tower—not the first time but the second time, trying so hard to get her to come down before

she jumped all over again. The pain she'd heard that night hadn't resurfaced in tangible ways, but it had been there, impossible to see because Buffy had been so fixated on her own.

And true to form, Dawn didn't want to let the moment stretch out. The next second, she had flipped her hair back and returned to the careful nonchalance of before. "So, how did Spike take it when you told him? You can skip the sex parts and get to the joyful weeping. I can never have enough blackmail material."

That much startled a laugh out of her. "What for?"

"Oh, *things*." Dawn grinned a little. "Seriously, though, on a scale of one to ten, he was in off-the-charts, infinity territory, wasn't he?"

"I'll find out soon. Plan is to head over once you hit the sack."

It seemed to take a beat for the words to land—like she understood them but didn't. But once that beat had passed, her grin had faded, and Dawn went bug-eyed. "Wait. Seriously? You *haven't* told him yet?"

"Umm, did you hear my story? I needed to see you and everyone. I needed to *tell* everyone. First priority was seeing you, not boin—err—romancing my soon-to-be boyfriend." She frowned at the disbelief on her sister's face. "What?"

"Don't *what* me! Buffy, you need to go. Like now."

Buffy glanced to the television. She had no idea what was going on in the movie but figured her message was clear—this was sister time. "Uhh, thought we were doing some serious bonding."

Dawn followed her gaze and, to her astonishment, rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, we are, but seriously, it's going to piss him off so much that he's the *last* person to know you love him. And if he finds out that you skipped out on telling him because of me—"

"Dawn, he loves you. He knows that you—"

"I know that! But I also know how crazy much he loves you and, really, with the getting over there nowish?" When Buffy failed to leap to her feet, Dawn jerked forward with dramatic flair. "I am so incredibly serious right now. You need to go. I have some homework to do before bed anyway."

"*Now* you mention it."

"Hey. QT with my big sister. Way more important than algebra."

"Not to college admissions, it's not." But Buffy grinned and looped

an arm around Dawn's neck to pull her in for a hug. "I love you, you know."

"I know."

"I mean it, Dawnie."

"Dying for me kinda gave it away."

"Just remember that on the days I'm not... When I'm just *not*."

"I will if you go see Spike. *Now*."

She grinned, squeezed her closer, then rolled to her feet. "All right. Hint taken. I'll make with the gone. Just don't think this gets you out of doing homework, missy. I'm going to start being a real mom about this stuff, too. Maybe even parent/teacher conferences to make sure you're getting your work done."

"Oh god." She looked genuinely alarmed at the prospect. "That sounds terrible."

"Oh, I'll make Terrible wet the bed. It comes down to it, it'll be teenage humiliation the likes of which—"

"I got it!" Dawn let out a squeal, but she was grinning broadly, flushed and about as pleased as Buffy could remember seeing her. "Now go. Make that vampire so happy that he'd lose his soul if he had one."

Buffy wasn't sure if she meant by sleeping with him or telling him she loved him and thought it safer not to ask. There were certain conversations she wasn't quite ready to have yet. Or ever. Instead, she gave her sister one last hug, soaking in the scent of her hair and her warmth. Holding on to this moment so it would be there for her to call upon for those moments in the future that weren't easy, that came with bitter fights and name-calling, and things said that she would later regret. Holding on to her with the memory of what it had been like not to have her and then to have her again. It was the closest she'd come to how it had felt watching the sun crest the horizon on the tower—that perfect clarity that she'd taken with her in the leap.

And for the first time in what felt like forever, beyond the things she'd told the others and herself, Buffy truly thought there was a good chance she would be okay.

29

NOW I KNOW ALL THE WRONG TURNS, THE STUMBLES AND FALLS BROUGHT ME HERE

It occurred to her, just as she was ready to leave Revello Drive, that there was one conversation she still needed to have. More specifically, a question that she needed to ask. Even if she already had the answer, there would be proper finality in hearing it from the source. So after seeing Dawn up the stairs, lingering long enough for the definitive *click* of her door closing to ring through the otherwise still air, Buffy grabbed the cordless, went back to the family room and sank onto the sofa, then dialed the number she had committed to memory what felt like a lifetime ago.

It was beyond late but, thanks to vampire hours, he answered on the second ring. "Hello?"

Buffy let out a slow breath and wondered if he could hear her heart thumping. Knowing he probably could. "Hi. It's me."

"Buffy."

The way he always said her name, both full of the warmth that came with happy memories and surprise that she still existed outside of them took her aback. It wasn't anything like the way he'd said her name over the last few days—no, this was an Angel who still longed for her in that quiet, noble way of his. Or more accurately, the idea of her, as she had longed for the idea of him, safe in their assumptions of how

those ideas would bloom if given the chance. Just enough to keep them wondering about the other and what might have been—to never truly move on.

There was no twinge this time, no flare-up of a wound that hadn't ever truly healed. While Buffy couldn't say she didn't feel anything, what she did feel was more like what she felt when she thought of Riley. Someone who had meant something to her and would always be important as a result, but not with longing or regret, and definitely not love. Or the kind of love either wanted from her, anyway.

"I need to ask you something," she said. "And I need you to tell me the truth."

"You have to ask me to tell you the truth?" He tried to play it off like a joke, but she heard the tension there—the warmth edging from his voice as he stepped into less certain territory. "Did something happen? I know last night... There's so much I didn't say that I should have. You'd think after two hundred years, I couldn't be caught off guard, but you always manage to surprise me."

She almost laughed and was grateful when she caught herself. "I'm not calling about that. I'm actually calling about something that happened a couple of years ago."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Do you remember the first time I visited you in LA?"

The silence that consumed the line was absolute—enough that she began to think the connection might have dropped. Unlike other people, Angel didn't need to breathe. He could stay quiet as long as he wanted, and given the hour, there wasn't a ton of background noise to reassure her that he was still there. But even with that stillness, Buffy knew he was. Angel's silences had a life of their own. She could always tell when he was with her, whether watching her from afar or keeping pace with her at her side. Time and distance had done little to change that.

Finally, he cleared his throat. "Yes."

He didn't offer any more. That didn't surprise her, either.

"There was a demon. We were talking and it kinda crash-landed in your office. You killed it."

"Yes."

"Here's my question—was that the first time you killed it?"

Again, the line went quiet, though less quiet than before. There were the faint sounds of rustling and a low squeak that might have been the wheel of a rolling chair. She wondered if he was doing a dance of semantics. Technically, with a day rewound, it would have been the first time so he could lie without lying. But he'd also have to know that she already had the answer, that asking itself was just a formality, and that telling her anything but the full, unabridged truth would backfire.

Then, at last, he said, "No." The word was heavy but soft.

"It turned you human. You became human for a day and then decided to go back to being a vampire."

"Buffy—"

"I'm just asking. I'm not calling to read you the riot act."

"But you're not asking. You know."

"Doesn't mean I don't need to hear you say it."

He let out a breath, and she strained to remember if that was something he did often. Hearing it was a little jarring. If nothing else, Angel had never seemed as alive as Spike had—not as a vampire or as a human.

"The Oracles told me that you would die. Believe me, Buffy, it was the hardest decision I ever made. I don't let myself think about it—especially after what happened last May." Another one of those strange breaths. "I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought it would save you."

Buffy sighed and sat back against the sofa, pressing her eyes closed. Not really sure what she was feeling at the moment. Relief that he hadn't made this more difficult than it needed to be. Vindication in having the truth at last, a thing outside of herself and her experiences that she could point to if the others ever needed proof that she'd been in another Sunnydale, occupied the space of another Buffy whose life had been shaped by a decision Angel had made. Or not made. Anger and resentment, even in knowing what she did, at the way it had happened. Confusion that would likely never be satisfied at how he could have known her death was on the horizon and not said anything, not done anything. A combination of curiosity and understanding as to the awkward undercurrent of their meeting, properly contextualized

now with the missing information, his knowledge that death had been coming for her and how he'd done nothing to stop it. Then more relief at the same, knowing now that if he'd given her a chance to talk him out of turning back the day, she would have succeeded. All of this hit her at once, a riptide of sensation determined to pull her under with no promise of where she would land.

"Buffy." His voice had an edge to it, one she recognized. "Buffy, please say something."

"You made the right call." The words were out before she could vet them—before she was certain that she could back them up with sincerity. She became certain, though, the second she heard them. Anger required too much energy to maintain and she had no more of herself to give him. "We would have been a disaster."

"What?"

"Just trust me. It would've been bad." Buffy released a shaky breath. "So if that's something you've ever wondered. If you've ever thought about it."

"I think about it all the time."

That sounded like something he said because he thought he should, not because it was true. She decided not to call him on it. "Well, what I said. About the bad."

A pause. "Is this why you were so distant last night? You knew... You knew about that day we had? Before I took it back?"

"No. I didn't know until—well, today, I guess."

"How?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Buffy—"

"Let's just say I had questions about us that have been answered and leave it at that." Buffy breathed out, waited for him to object—to demand some answers of his own. The demand never came. Maybe she'd stunned him speechless. "Thanks, Angel. It was good seeing you."

He started to sputter something in response, but she hung up before he could get more than a few syllables out. She wasn't so naïve as to think that was the end of the conversation—he would want to know more, and maybe she would tell him, but that wasn't something she wanted to decide just now. Talking to him had simply been the last

step she needed to take before she left this house. She didn't want anything unexplored or unsaid when she finally told Spike everything.

And god, she had no idea where she would begin. How to start with something like this. The last time she'd seen Spike—this Spike, *her* Spike—had been the night the house had flooded. He'd sat with her on the back porch, trying to get her to smile over things that weren't funny. He'd been there to throw in a good fight when a demon had decided to add to the growing pile of bills and concerns and other things she hadn't had to worry about when she'd been dead. He'd just been *there*. Always. He'd let her be alone without being alone.

It had been like that ever since the first night. Since she'd gone for a walk around town and somehow ended up at his crypt, not knowing that had been her destination but also knowing it felt right and good. The nights spanning that first one and the last one they'd shared on the porch had been filled with more of the same. She'd tell herself she didn't need to stop by his crypt, that she would find nothing there except a vampire who was in love with her who she couldn't love back, and the best thing she could do to be Buffy was stay away from him. Ultimately, though, her patrols would stretch out, and she'd look for reasons to avoid going home. Knowing she couldn't be the Buffy her friends wanted to see, knowing that would disappoint them, and that her happy face had more than a few cracks in it. Also it hurt to wear, stretched and unnatural as it was. All she'd wanted was the freedom to be the Buffy she actually was, and there was only one place to get that—only one person to give it.

Spike had been there, door open, for any version of Buffy that crossed the threshold. Sad, quiet, loud, miserable, angry, devastated—anything she felt was fair game. No face to put on. No song and dance to perform. And there had been something so freeing in knowing that that she hadn't been able to stay away. Buffy couldn't be Buffy with the people who claimed to love her, only with the person who wasn't supposed to. Somehow that hadn't been clue enough.

This would be one of the few nights she hadn't shown right up after the sun had gone down. And Spike would have definitely noticed. He might not ask why—hell, he probably wouldn't. This Spike was also sticking to a delicate script. Not trying to get more than she had to

give, perhaps knowing how it would go and determined not to upset the balance they'd struck. He would let her get away with just about anything right now, so long as he thought it would help.

Only the thing she needed was a way to tell him...well, everything. She hoped the walk from Revello Drive to his crypt would clear her head a little or give her at least a launch point. It did not. The closer she drew to him—the more the conversation became a thing she was going to have and not simply hypothetical—the muddier her thoughts became. The best she could come up with were a series of stupid one-liners like, "You won't believe the day I've had," or, "Say, wanna hear a funny story?" or, "You know how you're desperately in love with me and we don't talk about it?"

Nothing good.

And despite whatever Dawn thought, the fact that Buffy knew how this would go—how Spike would react—did little to kill her nerves, which was the very definition of unfair. Because it *wasn't* like she was putting her heart on the line or anything, opening herself up to the possibility of rejection. Spike was the only man in her life who left zero doubt in her head as to how he felt about her. Whose words and actions were always complementary, always, and had been since the start. But it mattered—the way she said it and the way he heard it. It all mattered because it was the start of something. The start of *them*, and she needed to do this right.

Buffy stopped when she was just outside the crypt, drew in a breath to calm her frantic heart, though it did little good. The walk here was one she felt she'd made a thousand times now. She knew that wasn't unique to having been in the other world, knew she had set out from home on more than one occasion to see if Spike had information she could buy, or if he could be persuaded to watch her family in her stead. Over and over again, she'd sought him out, not realizing what she was building. What it meant that she always knew the answer, that she could depend on him even when doing so had been the definition of reckless. It hadn't always been like that—but then he hadn't always been in love with her—except that he also had, whether or not he'd known it. But the last few days had transformed the familiar trek between destinations into something else. The crypt had become

home while her own home had become somewhere cold and foreign. A place she couldn't live, despite however much she tried.

It wouldn't be like this here, though. She knew that. The crypt stuffed full of homey décor and Buffy-friendly food was in a different world, with a different Spike. A Spike who was now with a different Buffy, the entire experience a bad memory that would one day fade. She wasn't stepping into the middle of a relationship here; she was at the beginning. Only she had what few people in love ever did.

Armed with that thought, Buffy sucked in a deep breath, told her nerves to shut up, and pushed the door open. It gave its customary clang of greeting, but that was all it gave. The inside of the crypt was bathed in darkness. No glow of the television, no flickering dance of candles—no nothing. She didn't even feel the telltale tingle on her neck. In fact, she felt nothing at all.

Still, that didn't stop her from trying. "Spike?"

Her own voice echoed back at her. It was the only answer she got.

Well, that was disappointing. For some reason, she hadn't even considered the possibility that Spike wouldn't be here when she showed up. He was always just here, especially now. Every night, like he was waiting for her.

Maybe that was it. It was several hours past the time she normally would have sought him out. He might have just figured she wouldn't and gone about his vampire business.

Well, whatever the case, she was here now and she wasn't leaving without saying her piece. Whatever that piece ended up actually being.

Buffy glanced around, or tried to. She'd become very spoiled over the past few days with Spike always around to turn on lamps or light candles. She wasn't even sure she remembered the layout well enough to confidently find her way to the sofa, her mind still overfull with images of a crypt that was not this one, as that was how the mind worked. A few days were all it took to acclimate, and it would take a minute to adjust back.

Thankfully, her body did the remembering for her. She managed to feel her way in the right direction, bumped into what turned out to be the couch and somewhat toppled into it. She'd had little occasion to lie on it before, and found that while it wasn't plush as the other Spike's,

it wasn't uncomfortable either. A place she could see herself curling up on a lazy Sunday afternoon, her head on her vampire's shoulder, one of her guilty pleasure movies playing in the background. She grinned a little at the image as she sank into the cushions, sitting at first then deciding to stretch out. Vampire hours, after all, might mean she'd be waiting a while.

It occurred to her, as exhaustion began to creep in, that most people likely wouldn't decide to wait in a cemetery to tell a guy she loved him. Most people would sigh, perhaps a bit disappointed, then turn and head home, determined to come back another day, another hour.

But she wasn't most people.

And she was already home.

THE TINGLE on her neck that warned her when a vampire was near was not a sensation she had ever considered pleasant, though she'd learned there were exceptions. When the tingle was more than just her preternatural alert system kicking into high gear—when it felt familiar, even comfortable, in a way she was certain it wasn't supposed to. It was that tingle, more than his voice, that reached into her dreams and pulled her out of sleep.

"At a bit of a loss, love," Spike was saying as she blinked her eyes open. "See, I coulda sworn I lived alone." He was squatting beside her, dressed in a black tee and jeans, doing that inquisitive head-tilt thing of his, his gaze weighty. There was the familiar longing, however subdued it was these days, overlaid with a healthy dose of uncertainty and a faint flicker of exasperation. How anyone could feel that much at one time had her mystified, but such was Spike.

The thought had barely blipped to life before the implication struck home. Buffy inhaled and almost sprang up, her mind clicking on. *All* of her clicking on, remembering where she was and why.

"Oh," Buffy said, her nerves beginning to race once more. She looked around, saw the crypt was now alight with the usual candles, which brought all the details she'd missed upon entering into sharp

relief. His duster was draped across the green chair with the casual air of someone who had just gotten in, stark against the barren walls, the rug-less stone floor, the lack of a table to share meals, the absence of the weapons chest or lamps from home. The kitchen nook stood where it always had, complete with its refrigerator and assorted clutter but missing any indication that someone else called this place home, secret or otherwise.

And of course there was Spike. Here, studying her with a frown. A frown that, like his eyes, she could read.

"You, umm, just get home?" she heard herself ask, and fought a wince at how lame that sounded.

"Uhh, yeah." He considered her a beat longer, then straightened so he was on his feet again. "Waited here for a bit. Not long," he added, rubbing a hand along the back of his head. "Never said you were comin' by, right? Thought you might, is all. When you didn't, I wagered you... Well, you were off last night, weren't you? Hadn't heard how it went. Could be you were still with him."

"With him?" Her brain clicked on. "Oh, right," she finished lamely. "With him. Yeah, no. We didn't talk long."

A flat grin stretched his lips. "Just got right to the good stuff, yeah?"

"The huh?" Buffy stared at him a moment, not sure if she was extra sluggish because she was still waking up or if there was some dimensional jetlag at work, but she was following precisely zero of what he was saying. At least at first. When she realized what he meant, she wrinkled her nose and gave her head a violent shake. "There isn't enough *no* in the world."

"Oh no? Thought you two had a forever kinda love."

"Yeah, well, believe me, I just got a lesson in how very wrong that was."

She thought he might brighten a bit at that. Enough to at least ask what she meant, or better yet, what she was doing there. He did neither. Instead, Spike looked away, still tense and she had no idea why.

"Just didn't know what to think, is all," he said at length. "When you didn't come 'round, yeah? Been mostly every night since... Well, since. Then you pop off to meet him and I don't hear a lick."

"It wasn't that kind of meeting, Spike. It was more, 'hey, look, you're alive and you weren't last week' kinda thing."

Some of the tightness in his face loosened, and she thought she might have seen a flicker of relief in his eyes, but he sniffed and shrugged before she could take a closer look. "Ah, well. Know how it is between exes."

"As in they occasionally chain each other up and threaten to feed the new person they love to them if they don't admit they have feelings?"

Spike stilled once more and finally met her gaze head-on, one of those deep, searching looks that had, not too long ago, put her on the defensive. Or at least reminded her that she needed to be careful what she said around him. The delicate balance of spending time with a guy who claimed he was in love with you when you had no intention to reciprocate.

Whatever he saw in her eyes, though, had him relaxing again. His shoulders sagged and a soft grin flirted with his lips. "Yeah. Guess that's right." He looked at her a moment longer, still searching, before dropping the last of his tension and slipping back into the role he had been assigned. All the awkward gone. "So, reckon it's a good one?"

"A what?"

He nodded at her. "The story. Not every day a fella comes back from a game of cards to find the Slayer catchin' her kip on his couch."

Buffy offered a wry smile and finally sat up, enjoying the way he followed the movement. Enjoying even more that she knew what he was doing—hell, even a little what he was thinking. Or at the very least what he was hoping. It felt good and right. There was no sense of *other*, no awareness of something that should be here but wasn't. She was with a Spike who was with her completely.

"It's been a crazy long day," she said, pleased at how natural she sounded. Not at all like she'd thought she would when she'd been mentally rehearsing openers. "Like you wouldn't believe."

"Yeah? Had a few of those, myself."

"I kinda doubt like this one." Buffy hesitated, then decided it would be better if she were at eye level with him for this conversation and rose to her feet. "Warning—the story's on the long side. I can give

you the full now or just the highlights. Highlights being something I'm hoping you'll like."

Spike flicked his brow but kept his expression impassive. "Not much for long stories," he said in a carefully neutral tone. God, he was trying so hard—had been since the resurrection. Give her what she needed, soak in whatever she gave him, but keep himself at a distance. Not knowing his role beyond the signals she gave him. Not knowing if anything had changed beyond what was obvious.

"So, highlights?" Buffy released a breath that shook. All of her shook, she realized, her heart doing that double-time thing, her palms suddenly covered in a thin layer of sweat. Again, she thought of how there was only one way this would go and how it probably seemed bonkers to be so worried about what to say, but that it mattered. These seconds dividing her between what had been and what would be, standing on the edge before she took a dive, knowing the fall would leave her exhilarated and fused with new life but being nervous anyway. Also knowing that he knew all that, that he could sense something was different. All this unspoken knowledge made the air feel electric.

At last, he nodded. "Highlights'll work."

"I took a trip today," she said, and was surprised when her voice wasn't shaking with the rest of her. That was good. Maybe she could get through this. "Not a planned one."

He blinked. "Oh?"

"Yeah."

"Go anywhere special?"

"Yes. Very special." She swallowed, moving forward almost without being aware of it. Closer to him—closer like she'd been the last few days. But still, there was no second-guessing here. No wondering if he was looking at her and thinking about someone else. "Parts of the trip were bad. Like...really, really bad." The sort of bad she didn't want to think about right now. "But the good parts were really good. The good parts were you."

Something shifted in his eyes, confusion mixed with what she thought might be hope. If it was, it was cautious hope. The sort he didn't think there was a reason to believe in but existed anyway, as it was all he had. "What's that?"

Buffy let her gaze fall. "It went something like this."

She took his face between her hands and drew him down to her, whispered the faintest hint of a kiss against his lips and, to her horror, nearly burst out into tears as his taste flooded her mouth. That essential Spike taste, the same that had become her addiction over the last couple of days. The very same. Only also not the same at all because it was him, the Spike who was entirely hers. And then whispered kisses weren't enough. She wanted him unleashed, grabbing and stroking and holding her to his chest. The thought barely had time to blip into existence before it morphed into reality, Spike groaning and seizing her hips to pull her against him, not so much taking control as surrendering to it. He sucked and nibbled, growled and chased her tongue with his own, growing hungrier with every stroke. Letting her feel it, feel him, his hands wandering slowly at first, then with increased confidence. One second holding her in place, as though afraid she might bolt, then sliding up her sides, ghosting the curve of her breasts—he growled again when she pushed into him rather than away—then up even more, fingers tangling in her hair.

He held her there when he broke his lips from hers, panting almost as hard as she was. His eyes now impossibly dark but somehow aglow at the same time.

He looked at her and she was alive.

"Buffy."

"Uh huh," she agreed, slightly buzzed.

"Say this happened on a trip you took?"

She nodded hard, sucking in air as she knew it was about to be in short supply again. "The good parts. You want the long version of the story?"

"Fuck yes, I do." Spike dropped his mouth to her neck, skating over the throb of her pulse. Making it and her jump as one at the memory of how his fangs felt against her skin, inside of her. "Kinda thing you need to tell me now or are you gonna stick around for a bit?"

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Then I suppose I can wait," he said, and took her lips again. Bolder. And the floor beneath her feet started to move—except no, that was her—and in a flash it seemed she was on the couch again, only

Spike was above her, kissing her again with singular focus mixed with desperation she didn't think she could match, but damn if she wouldn't try. She was a bit frantic, more so than she would have expected. It was the difference—the same she wasn't sure she would have ever noticed if she hadn't found her way back. More than the way he'd kept himself closed off from her, even after they'd been together, impossible to read unless he dropped his guard—there had just been parts of him that could never be hers because they were *hers*. Likely he hadn't even been aware of it, how much he held back. How much *Spike* had been reserved for the Buffy who truly owned his heart.

That wasn't the case now. She had become *that* Buffy.

And suddenly, it seemed beyond cruel that she should know all of this and he didn't. So, with effort, Buffy broke her lips from his on a deep gasp, and threw her head back when he began nibbling his way down her neck again. Soft, urgent kisses that vibrated with the rumble of a low, persistent growl.

"It should be now. When I tell you," she breathed, her eyes fighting to keep open. "Spike..."

"Mmm. Bit busy at the mo'." He met her gaze and grinned wildly, the expression so free and happy it had her lungs working overtime. "Got some questions of my own I've been dyin' to answer for a time now. For starters..." He drew back just enough to tug her black blouse over her head. "Just how good you taste here. Care to share?"

He was fingering the dip between the cups of the bra she'd put on approximately a week ago, which fueled her with the mad urge to laugh. Never in a million years would she have envisioned, as she'd dressed what would have been that morning, that she'd be undressing like this at the end of the day. That version of herself, the one who had spent her day jumping through hoops to try to be the person she thought she was supposed to be, felt distant now. So much had happened.

"Stay with me, pet," Spike murmured, and kissed her again when their eyes met. Then his weight was gone and she nearly cried out in protest—would have, had he not seized her around the hips to pull her with him. Back so that he was sitting with her astride him, positioned in such a way that all he had to do was arch a little to tease her with his

cock. And the drive to stop and talk melted away once more, unable to compete with the strokes of his mouth or the way he touched her—a combination of firm and commanding and soft and reverent. Like he was at war with himself, the monster that wanted to possess and the man that wanted to bask.

She thought maybe the man was more in control right now, for instead of ripping off her bra—something she knew damn well to expect—he reached around to work the clasp, keeping his eyes on hers as he did. And there was still so much there. So much it seemed he was daring her to see, set on making sure she knew exactly where she was and who she was with. That she was here with him in the moment and not somewhere else.

But when he began tugging her bra straps down her arms, he lowered his eyes to watch as the cups fell away, and let out a little whimper the second she was bare to him. "Bloody hell," he whispered, skating one hand along her ribs until he had a breast cradled against his palm. "This really happenin', love?"

"I really, really hope so."

That had his attention snapping back to her face. "You do?"

"Like I said, you were the best part of the trip." Buffy steadied a hand on his chest, which rose with another of those unneeded breaths. And seeing that she had his attention, that he was listening beyond the lust fog, she plowed on. "I was at the Magic Box, trying to do the whole retail thing. Got my hands on something dangerous and zap—bye-bye Buffy."

Spike stilled, then sat back, some of the heat in his eyes cooling. "Somethin' had you at the shop? That's why you're here?"

The question threw her off, but only for a second. The waver in his voice, combined with the confusion and want in his eyes, clued her in to what he was really asking. "Not a spell or anything," she said. "It sent me somewhere and... I was there for a few days."

"*Days*?"

"Uh huh. The return trip made it a blip for everyone else."

His brow knitted, and he was really listening now. No pressure or anything. "Return trip from where?"

"Another world, but one that was this world—another Sunnydale."

"Not makin' much sense here, pet."

No, she supposed she wasn't. But she had no other way to say it. "There are lots of worlds and dimensions and...stuff. Ask Anya about the shrimp one sometime." Buffy tried for a laugh but found she couldn't quite convince her body to cooperate, the reality that she was actually trying to tell him this slamming down upon her. That she was sitting on his lap, her nipples all pointy and exposed, because she'd let herself get carried away made it worse. Action was her forte—talking about feelings? Not so much. But she owed him the talking parts, and before they did anything else.

It was just strange, sitting here and looking at a Spike whose last few days hadn't been filled with them. Who didn't already know all the things she needed to say—who would be hearing all of this for the first time. The intimacy she'd shared with the other Spike had felt safe, perhaps because she'd eased her way into it. Not realized until after they'd already shared as much as they had just how far she'd gone with him. Starting over with that awareness was all kinds of terrifying.

"This world I went to was another Sunnydale," Buffy said slowly. "One with another you. Another *everyone*, actually. If you still want the short version, here it goes—I spent a lot of time with the other you. He and the other me were together. I mean, she wasn't there—she was *here*—but they'd been together for a while. They were involved. Majorly involved. Public sex involved."

She could tell she'd lost him before he opened his mouth.

"What the hell are you on, Slayer? Another you? Who was here?"

"For a few days, yes. Probably hanging out with you a lot. Seeing as she's in love with you."

That stunned him into silence. Not a good silence, either, more the sort that followed an explosion. Then something in his face hardened, closed off, and before she could say anything else, he'd shoved her onto the empty cushion beside him and leaped to his feet.

"Bloody hell, Slayer. Knew you were a bitch but never pegged you for cruel."

Buffy scrambled to a sitting position, instinctively crossing her arms over her breasts. "What?"

"Don't come in here and throw words around like that. Been tryin',

haven't I? Tryin' for you—to be what you need. You want me pantin' after you, you don't need to put on a show. Wave this idea that a girl who's you but not you might actually—"

"No, Spike, I wouldn't do that."

"So you mean to tell me I had a few days here with a version of you I can't remember, one who loves me—"

"I mean to tell you much more than that. There's a lot, Spike. And it's all true. I'm...not good at the talking stuff and I did this all backwards, but...please? Let me try?"

If she lived a thousand years—and according to a part of the prophecy she hadn't let herself dwell on, that was a possibility—she would never forget the way he looked right now. His eyes widening, his chest beginning to rise and fall again, the sound of his breaths against the otherwise still crypt air almost more intimate than what they had been doing a moment ago. Buffy forced herself not to look away, to keep her gaze on him—to show him the only way she knew how that she meant it.

Then, when she thought she might have found her voice, she started again. "There was a thing at the Magic Box. A thing I shouldn't have handled but I did anyway, and it made me switch places with this other Buffy for a few days. I spent that time with another Spike, trying to work a way to get home. He wanted his Buffy back and I... Look, I'm sorry. I'm telling you this all wrong." She glanced around in search of her bra, marveling at how her cheeks could feel warm when the rest of her was chilled. "I should've done the explainy part before I made with the kissage. I just...got ahead of myself."

The next second, he had his hands around her upper arms, fingers digging into her skin. He was on his knees before her again, the shadow of his anger gone. The confusion too, though it had morphed into something else. Something closer to the look he'd given her that first night when she'd come down the stairs. Open and vulnerable, stripped of pretense and posturing and full of wonder. "Sorry," he said after a beat, his voice thick. "Don't go."

"Really wasn't the plan."

"Just... Bloody hell, Buffy, I come home from cards and you're here,

like you were waitin' for me. Lookin' at me like that. Then you snog me and—"

"I know. Massively unfair."

He barked a laugh. "Not exactly the word I'd use."

"I distracted you."

"Have a habit of doin' that." He searched her eyes a moment longer before dropping his gaze back to her mouth. "This other me, the one you spent so much time with, he's the reason you're here?"

"No. *You're* the reason I'm here." Buffy wet her lips, watched his expression grow hungry again as he followed the motion. "I had a choice of coming back. We got...close, the other Spike and me."

He brought his eyes to hers again. "How close?"

"Way close."

"Closer than you've been with me tonight?"

"Yes." A shadow crossed his face, but she'd known to expect it. It mirrored the one that had crowded her at the thought of him with the other world's Buffy—no matter how illogical it was. "After we thought I was stuck there," she went on. "And that there was no way to switch us back. It was also after I realized I was in love with you and...I might never see you again to tell you."

A sound that was half-gasp and half-cry tore through his lips. "You're what?"

She wanted to say it again, keep saying it, but her mouth didn't get the memo and soldiered on ahead, yammering at a million miles a second. "He wanted his Buffy back. Said he loved me because I'm Buffy but it was about her for him. The entire time I was there. And I wanted to get back for, well, pretty much all the reasons, but I wanted to see you. Tell you that—"

But that was the most she got out before his lips were on hers again, and this time there was no restraint. None of the careful hopefulness he'd poured into her before, soft and tender like he was afraid moving too fast would scare her off. Spike seized and shoved, fell back with her, on top of her, crowding her against the couch cushions with enough force the air was knocked out of her and into him. He drank it down greedily and fed her a moan in turn, his mouth in constant motion—delving and stroking and tasting and whimpering as his hands

exploded into action. Cupping her face at first, holding her there under the onslaught of his kisses, thumbs rubbing circles into her cheeks until he started a trek downward, one his lips were quick to follow.

"You love me," he gasped into her skin, gliding his fingers over her breasts as he moved. Pressing kisses across her collarbone, nibbling at her shoulder, lower and lower still until he was teasing a nipple with his tongue. Buffy inhaled, tunneling her fingers through his hair to hold him to her, tensing when he crossed the place where—in a body that was no longer hers—his fang marks had stood proud against her skin. This time the thought, the memory of what it was like to have him inside her like that, made everything clench, and she arched her hips to meet his, nearly sobbing with relief when she felt his answering thrust.

"Oh god," she gasped, fisting handfuls of his hair, earning a playful snarl and another roll of his hips, bringing his thick cock in contact with where she wanted him most.

And though she knew she shouldn't, though she didn't want to, Buffy couldn't help but think of the times she'd been with him before. After she'd first told him she loved him, how he'd held her all night and made love to her the next morning. It had been good, so beyond good, but it hadn't felt like this. Not the mad, desperate rush of sensation, of driving a guy so crazy he couldn't decide where to touch her and tried for everywhere at once. It had been explosive, yes, but the kind of explosive that occurred between lovers who knew each other well. At least on his side. He'd known what to do to get her whimpering and writhing for him, what she'd do when he moved just so, when he stroked her like that, when he performed a certain bit of magic with his tongue. It had been blissful to the point of distraction, and maybe if she had well and truly been stuck there, she never would have realized that she'd missed something critical. A part that had already been experienced by a different Buffy.

It wouldn't have mattered, she knew, if she *had* been stuck there. But she wasn't stuck there, and now, with this Spike—this Spike who was completely hers—Buffy felt just how much it did matter. The utter joy and novelty of experiencing someone for the first time. This Spike was not balancing his knowledge of someone else to drive her crazy,

rather driving her crazy by trying to learn what did exactly that. This was the first time Spike had ever peppered a path of kisses from one breast to the other, and she could feel it in how hard he shook. In the way his lips moved across her skin, interspersed with indulgent laps of his tongue. This was the first time Spike had tasted her sweat, felt her tremble beneath him, heard the sounds she made when he licked her nipples and skimmed his fingers down her belly. It was all new. All hers.

All theirs.

"You love me," he whispered against her skin once more, blinking up at her with eyes so dark they looked black. "You love me."

"I do."

"Say it. Wanna hear the words."

And there was that, too. That note in his voice, awe and wonder and some of that soul-stealing happiness Dawn had mentioned before. She had missed that when she'd told him the first time, because it hadn't been his first time. Maybe that shouldn't matter—it certainly hadn't in the moment, but it did now.

"I love you," she said, her eyes stinging, the words both confession and liberation. "Spike, I love you."

He studied her for a moment longer, his chest rocking, before he broke with another half-moan, half-growl, crashing his lips to hers in hurried, urgent strokes. His kisses were like a drug. The best drug—one she could happily lose herself inside. And when he broke to kiss his way down her body again, that was good too. Better than good, for she felt him in every nip. The thrill of discovery, his own excitement and need in every swipe he stole. It could have lasted forever and she wouldn't have cared, but when he started tugging on her skirt, her heart performed a somersault.

"Christ, you smell good," Spike muttered, sitting back far enough to strip the material down her legs. "So sweet. So hot."

They were doing this here, she realized, as he trailed his fingers over the crotch of her soaked panties. On the couch. That was just fine with her—she didn't think she could stand it if he stopped touching her now, wasn't sure she could negotiate her way downstairs with any sort of finesse. And it seemed right, their first time being somewhere

new for her. A clean break in her head separating what had been from what would be.

More of them that *was* them.

And suddenly, Buffy had to touch him back. Needed him to feel some of what she was feeling, because she wasn't good with words—even when she was—and she knew that in those times he didn't hear how she felt, he would be able to feel it. So she tugged his shirt over his head, grinning when he smirked at her as though they were sharing a private joke, then grinning even more when he moaned at the feel of her hand on his skin. First her hands, then her mouth, following the same trail he'd laid out on her. Over his neck, with particular attention paid to the mark on his throat that she thought she might try to make her own, down his chest, pausing to tease his nipples, which made him growl and pant, made him pull her tighter to him before she began moving farther south. Over his abs and lower until her mouth was at the waistband of his jeans.

"Buffy." The tremor in his voice seemed to vibrate through her. She felt it everywhere—in her throat, her chest, between her legs. "Fuck, Buffy..."

Something caught up with her, though, when she began teasing her fingers along the straining denim. When she undid the button of his jeans. A flash of doing this before forced its way through her head. A flash she didn't want but couldn't avoid. But there was something freeing in it, too. Thinking about that moment, how hopeless she'd been, that clawing sensation from deep inside pushing her to take something that wasn't hers. Buffy couldn't quite leave it behind and could never pretend it had never happened, but it wouldn't shadow everything here the way she'd started to think it might in the other world. Here, she wasn't in competition with anyone—there were no ghosts in the corners, no lingering memory of someone else. When she took his cock into her hand, he wouldn't be thinking about anything but her. Same for when she closed her mouth around him and drew him in, swirling her tongue, exploring the dip in the head. His fingers wove through her hair and he moaned her name, arching off the couch to thrust more fully into her mouth. All of him still trembling, this being of immense strength coming undone beneath her.

"So hot. God, yes, Slayer, just like like that."

She murmured a response around him—what, she didn't know, and it didn't matter. He bucked and swore, tightened his grip on her hair as she pulled and sucked and tried to remember exactly what he'd told her when it hadn't been him. Only the thought must have been the type he could read, perhaps in a little bubble above her head, for the next time she rolled her lips over the head of his cock, he seized the opportunity to seize *her,* making her squeak in surprise as he shoved her back against the couch cushions.

Then he was over her, his expression fierce. "He teach you the way to suck me off?"

"I... He..." But she couldn't say more. The words wouldn't come.

"What a good little student you are." Spike trailed his gaze down her body, worked his throat, his Adam's apple bobbing in the soft candlelight. "Seems I need to play catch-up. Don't wanna fall behind."

"Spike—"

"Don't you worry your little head, love..." He nuzzled her throat and began working his way south again. "Spike's here. He'll take care of you. Just gotta make sure you're here with *me*."

"I am. I am."

"Mhmm. You sure about that?" The question seemed to be an earnest one, but when she peeked her eyes open, she found him grinning up at her from between her legs. "I'm a bloody hard act to follow."

"Good thing I know you're up to the challenge."

He chuckled, then lowered his head and nipped at her inner thigh. "You givin' me cheek, Slayer?"

"No. I'm giving you me."

At that, he paused, or most of him did, his breaths harsh against the otherwise still air. "Now *there's* a good answer," he rumbled, then lowered his head to tongue her through the fabric of her panties, pressing up against her slit. "Steady now, pet," he continued in a voice that was anything but. "Need to unwrap my present."

Buffy mewled and rolled her hips, distantly aware that she had lost control of the situation and wondering what it said about her that she didn't care. Because she didn't. Not with Spike touching her like that,

his cool skin somehow intensifying the fever of her own. Then he was dragging her panties down her legs, the material a soft, whispered tease, and bracing a hand on either thigh to hold her legs open.

"Now this here's a pretty sight," Spike said, nudging his nose against her clit, chuckling again when she gasped and arched in response. "He do this to you, too?" And he licked a line from her opening up, his eyes rolling back and a moan tearing through his throat.

She squeezed her eyes shut, skating her teeth over her lower lip. Distantly, she was aware he'd asked her a question—that she was supposed to be responding, or at least trying to think of something to say, but he'd chased all sense away with that mouth of his. His fault, really.

As it was, Spike didn't seem eager for an answer. The only thing he seemed eager for was her, learning her, reading her. Stroking with his tongue at first, taking careful laps of her clit, then licking his way up and down the seam of her pussy, diving inside of her for a few indulgent strokes—moaning almost louder than her, which had her damn near on fire. Nuzzling her again, then slipping a finger inside of her. Just one at first, a tease, before another followed. Murmuring all the while, impossible as it should have been with his mouth on her—how hot she was, how sweet she tasted, how he loved the way she felt around him, how he couldn't wait until it was his cock, how she could break him and he wouldn't mind. So long as he got to keep this, keep her, feel the way she shook, see the way she looked at him. That was worth all the breaking in the world.

She meant to stop him—wanting the first time to be a shared one between them. Spike, however, had other ideas. He flattened his tongue against her clit, pushing his fingers into her at a rhythm, his low voice a constant soundtrack against the stillness surrounding them. It was familiar and not, the moves ones she knew but as she should have experienced them, buoyed by that tentative air of firsts. Him learning how he could push her, what was too much and what wasn't enough. She tightened her grip on his head in a half-hearted attempt to pull him up, but he growled against her flesh and firmed his hold on her open thighs, one-handed as it was.

"Not until I taste it," he rasped, the words heavy and wet. "Not until you come all over my face."

Then he closed his mouth around her clit and sucked hard, and the sparks inside ignited as one, seizing and taking her over. Spike growled his approval around her soaked flesh, holding his tongue over her as though he could absorb her tremors as his own. And it kept coming—*she* kept coming. Each wave a surprise, jolting and fiery, so that by the time it finally subsided, when the shocks lessened in intensity, Buffy found herself little more than a sweaty, gasping mess. Spike still there between her legs, making happy yummy noises, his tongue inside of her. When she began to whimper again, he finally lifted his head, his eyes dancing, the candles catching the slick shine of his lips and mouth.

"Beautiful." He pressed a kiss to her inner thigh. "So beautiful."

"Spike..." She wasn't sure what she meant to say—her mind was overfull with sentiments and sensations that seemed beyond definition. Whatever he needed to hear, though, he did, for he was on his feet the next instant, shoving his jeans down the rest of the way and kicking off his boots. His cock slapped his stomach, and though it was a sight she was familiar with, she couldn't help the way her eyes widened.

"Mmm." He moved so he was over her again, his right hand bracing the back of the couch, the other around his cock, guiding him to her. Teasing the head along her already hypersensitive flesh, capturing the last flickers of her orgasm and using them to stoke the fires anew. "Fuck, how I love you." He tore his gaze from her pussy to her eyes. "Buffy—"

But she knew what he wanted. "I love you too. Now, please."

He was shaking again, nodding, and pushed inside of her as he leaned forward to take her mouth with a growl that faded into a gasp. Like she'd caught him off guard, like he was surprised. It was such a small sound but it made her chest wrench so hard she wondered if it was possible to fall in love with someone twice. And he kept kissing her as he began to move, slowly at first, taking long, indulgent strokes, holding himself when he was buried balls deep before pulling back again. As though determined to savor as much of her as possible.

But slow couldn't last. That need he'd restoked was too insistent, and thank god he was on the same page. Maybe he saw it in her eyes—or maybe the shock of being inside of her had faded—for in seconds, he was pounding into her with such force that the couch rocked with him. Hard and fast and noisy, so noisy, their flesh coming together in violent slaps, Spike staring down at her, his eyes never leaving hers, full of so much—wonder and disbelief, lust and pleasure, all stewing in that deep love she wasn't sure she deserved but would hold to her. He moaned and she whimpered and he kissed her and she kissed him, throwing her arms around him, determined to hold him to her, and he tried to do the same but somehow they lost their balance and went tumbling to the stone floor.

There was a brilliant moment where she was in the air, holding onto nothing but him, falling but safe. Then Spike landed on his back with a hard thud and she landed on top of him, the impact forcing his cock deeper inside of her. A raspy cry tore from her throat, somewhere between pleasure and pain. And she began writhing on him, bucking at a pace, working herself up and down his length in an increasing frenzy to feel that high again.

"Oh god," Buffy said, steadying herself against his chest. "You all right?"

"Bit past all right," Spike replied, almost laughing, his hands going to her hips. "Fuck yeah, Slayer, do me like that." He arched his head back with a gasp but opened his eyes almost immediately to watch her—watch *them* as he speared into her again and again. "Ride my cock. Take it—take me. Take whatever you want. It's all yours. All bloody yours."

He was. God, he was. She saw it on his face, the way his eyes burned; felt it in how he gripped her, in the flex of his neck, the arch of his hips. Much like everything else, she wouldn't have known to miss it—how he was with her now, really with her. Seeing her and wanting her, no hint of *other* lurking in the back. No thoughts of someone else, even if that someone was her. Just Spike, fully present, guiding her in hurried strokes up and down his cock, his chest heaving. His heart bare and open and hers just as the rest of him. All hers, just as he said he was.

This, more than anything else, felt like home.

"God, you're a vision," he rasped, the words tumbling off his lips quickly, as though he couldn't contain himself. Maybe he couldn't. "My hot, golden goddess. And you're here. You're here. Feel so good. Made for this, you were. Made for me. Such a tight pussy. Squeeze me like that, pet. Squeeze me so it hurts."

Buffy whimpered, digging her nails into his chest as she moved and rocked and took him in and out of her harder, faster. Focused on the way he felt inside her, every time she slid down, how her muscles seemed determined to grip him, hold him, keep him where he was but also not, because the fight was better. The wet drag of his flesh along hers, thrusting and chasing and needing and wanting more, more, more. Always more. Then his hand sliding over the curve of her hip, his fingers curled so his knuckle was there to brush against her clit every time she slammed down. A whisper, a tease, one that had her skin tingling and her muscles tensing and Spike groaning and begging her to do it some more, flex her cunt around him like that, to come undone, drench his cock, give all to him the way he'd already given all to her.

"I will, I will," she said. "Spike...need...kiss me."

He didn't hesitate. Spike lifted himself off the floor, cupped the back of her head, and smashed his mouth onto hers, swallowing her whimper and feeding her back one of his own in a brilliant clash of teeth and tongue, pulling and nipping and sucking and he tasted so good. Smoke and leather and alcohol and yeah, even the distant metallic taste of blood. All of it combined to make him, make Spike, and remind her of the last thing she had to give him.

It took effort but she managed to pull her lips away from his, directing him down the column of her throat. Shuddering when her pulse leaped, when he moaned again, when she felt him shift—wild and frenzied like he couldn't control himself.

But she knew better. He could. He just didn't have to.

"Do it," she said, digging her nails into his scalp. "Spike...bite me. Bite me, *please*."

The tremor that ran through him ran through her too, as did the sob he choked. But again, he didn't hesitate, didn't ask, and the second

his fangs pierced her skin, Buffy went nuclear, consumed in an explosion of pure white ecstasy that went on and on and on some more. All of her fell with it, spasming hard around his cock, her moan answering his as he stiffened and barreled into a release of his own, spilling inside her as he took her inside him. And there was so much left to say but everything important, everything he needed to know, had been said. She felt how deeply he felt it, how he held her and stroked and whispered and loved. Whatever came next—the other confessions she knew she needed to make, the impossible story at the end of the breadcrumbs she'd given him—might be difficult but it would be worth it. Because he was. Because they were.

Later, though she couldn't say how much, Buffy lifted her head. Found Spike staring at her, clutching her in his lap, stroking a hand down her spine, his fingers cool where she was hot. Her blood on his lips, his eyes—human now—searching hers. Hesitant, hopeful, and bursting with more of that thing that was solely his. This Spike. Her Spike. The one in her world. The one she'd crossed dimensions to see.

And maybe, if she was lucky, everything she had to say could wait just a little longer. Let her enjoy the quiet, the knowledge that she was exactly where she was supposed to be.

It was worth a shot.

"So, that's the short version," she said, cuddling into him, her cheek at his shoulder. "If you want the long version, you'll have to wait until I wake up."

He was still for a moment, then chuckled and closed his arms around her. "I can live with that."

30

INTO THE SPIRAL, YOUR WORLD AND MY WORLD

The layout of the other Spike's bedroom had imprinted on her head even more than the upstairs, perhaps because there hadn't been a firm foundation for it to rewrite. She had been down here a time or two prior to her trip to the other world, but those instances had been brief and intense—like chain-up intense—not allowing her time to adjust to her surroundings in such a way where they would become familiar.

So finding her Spike's place stripped down to the essentials threw her off guard—reinforced all over again just how much Buffy's presence had influenced and informed everything about Spike's environment. There were at least two dressers missing, along with a bookshelf or two that had been filled with little hallmarks of Buffy, weapons and girl stuff in equal measure. Things that packed into a lived-in bedroom over time that didn't really have a place, and ended up a little bit of everywhere as a result.

In this Spike's bedroom—*her* Spike's—there was the bed, a couple of rugs, and a scattering of general Spike debris on various surfaces. A lighter, a pack of cigarettes, some poker cards, keys to the DeSoto—or maybe that motorcycle he'd claimed in the great demon takeover that hadn't happened. Buffy supposed the next few days would be full of

these sorts of surprises—or not surprises, really, but stark reminders of the differences between this world and the one she'd created.

"Not much," Spike said behind her. "Bed's comfy enough, though, if you're aimin' to catch some kip. All yours if you want it."

"I want it," she said quickly, whirling around so fast she nearly crashed into him. "Just...taking it all in. You know?"

It was a dumb thing to say but he nodded as though he did, in fact, know. "Right. Yeah. Anything I can...?"

He was acting uncertain again. She couldn't say she blamed him. "A shirt, maybe?"

Spike immediately dropped his gaze to her naked breasts, which did not miss their cue. Her nipples went extra pointy and she could not blame that on the chilled crypt air. "Dunno," he said, then lifted a hand to cup one. He breathed out when she let him, ran a thumb across a pebbled peak. "Find the view mighty fetching."

"I'll be more comfortable in a shirt. Temperature-wise," she rushed to add when he looked at her sharply. "Kinda chilly." Especially while naked.

And she thought she might want to be dressed for this, whatever *this* turned out to be. The urge to curl up and sleep was strong, but she was slightly more awake than she had been when she'd made the suggestion. Awake and, more importantly, alight with renewed nerves at the massive *everything* she had to tell him. She knew herself well enough to guess that any attempt to fall asleep when her brain was this *on* would likely not be a successful one. And she wanted it over with. She wanted to get to the part where it was just them without the other Spike crowding the space.

"Right then. Don't want you to freeze." Spike dropped his hand and stepped away, nodding toward the bed. "Go on. Make yourself nice and cozy."

"I think I want to talk, actually. If that's okay?" When he frowned, she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and burst into a tried-and-true Buffy ramble. "Just... There's a lot. To tell you, I mean. And I think maybe we should do this now. Talk."

"About this other world."

"Yeah."

"With the other me."

"Uh huh. And more than that." Like a whole lot more. "So much happened and I just... I want you to know. No one else does."

He hesitated a beat longer—long enough for her to see the flicker of uncertainty and identify it for what it was.

"I mean, the others know the gist," Buffy said, hurried. "That's where I was tonight, why I didn't show up. I wanted to tell them and I did. I told them about Heaven, too."

The uncertainty became surprise. "Oh, yeah? How'd that go over?"

She thought about Willow, that imploring look she'd worn, that need to explain that mirrored so much of what she'd lived with over the past few days. How she knew that her friend likely was in for a sleepless night and how, callous or not, she thought that might be good for her. "About as well as I thought it would. But I needed to tell them. I don't think they would've understood the rest of it if I hadn't." Another pause. "I also told them about you. About loving you, I mean. About us. That I want there to be an us."

The shock that stormed his face had her chest tightening. How expressive he was, how open, how she didn't need to guess at what he was thinking as he bore it all without pretense. A handful of seconds ticked by, then another handful before he gave his head a shake.

"Your mates know you're here."

"Well, probably not. They were asleep when I left. But Dawn will let them know where to find me."

He choked. "Dawn?"

"Yeah. She thought you'd be mad that you were the last to know, and I understand if you are, but...telling them makes it real, right? I wanted it to be real before I came to see you."

There was another silence, thicker than the ones before. Then he released a long breath, flicked his gaze back at her. The weak light provided by the candles that had been burning for god-knows-how-long made his eyes, which she saw were wet, shine a little.

"I'll get you a shirt," he said hoarsely, and turned away.

Buffy rubbed her lips together, her heart hammering all over again. She took a seat on the edge of the bed, watched as he puttered naked around the space, lighting more candles and shoving obvious clutter

into darkened corners. Some of the tension of before had returned—not a ton, but enough to let her know he was still processing what she'd said, and there she couldn't blame him. It was big for her too.

As Spike moved from one corner to the next, all lean muscle and smooth skin, she forced her thoughts back to the challenge at her feet. The massive thing she needed to say and where would be best to start. Hoping the words would come to her in a flash of brilliance. Wishing she could channel some of that frankness she'd had as a teenager, when voicing her feelings—opening up in general—had been so easy.

With any luck, Spike would help her find that part of her too. She knew she could trust him with it.

At last, he finished stalling and tugged out a black tee out of a chest of drawers. "Think this one's the cleanest," he said, offering a soft smile as he approached and pressed it into her hands. "Smells that way, anyway."

She grinned, tugged the fabric over her head. "Thanks."

Her grin seemed to catch him off guard, for he sucked in a deep breath, taking her in as though realizing, for the first time, that she was sitting on his bed with no intention of leaving. A beat passed, then another, before he reached out to touch her, drag a finger down her cheek, flirting with another wisp of hair that had come loose from the sloppy ponytail she'd pulled it in upstairs. Then lower, over the fresh bite mark on her throat, his expression stormy. "Always wanted to see you in one of my shirts."

"Must be a guy thing."

Spike stared at the mark a moment longer before snapping back. He blinked upward, shrugged a shoulder, glanced down at himself. "Not gonna be too distractin' for you if I don't follow suit, is it?"

Buffy took it as the invitation it was, let her gaze run down the length of him, soak in all that pale, pristine skin stretched over hard muscle. When she got to his cock, she was unsurprised to find him swelling again. She'd gotten used to thinking about erections as somewhat permanent with Spike, though he'd told her—murmured, actually—that it was all her. Always had been. At this point, she might have been disappointed if he hadn't been hard.

"I'll keep my hands to myself."

"No one here's gonna stop you if you can't manage." Spike claimed the space beside her, sinking into the mattress. "Right then. Gonna tell all?"

"There are gonna be parts of this you don't like."

"Parts where you're gettin' shagged by a bloke who's not me but is?"

"I guess. Though I think the odds are pretty good that you got yourself *shagged* by a Buffy who was not this Buffy."

"That's just it, pet. *Think*. Not like either one of us'll know for sure, is there?"

She supposed that was true. "It's the thought that counts?"

"Nice try."

"Hey. I chose to come back, you know. I chose to come here. I didn't have to."

Spike slanted toward her like he intended to steal a kiss, hesitated—perhaps to give her a chance to pull back or punch him. When she didn't, he gave her another one of those soft smiles and took her mouth. "Mmm," he murmured against her lips. "Gonna take a minute to get used to that."

"Used to what?" she asked heavily, leaning into him.

"Snogging you whenever I like." He kissed her again, bringing his tongue into the equation this time, which was all kinds of unfair, not to mention counterproductive to story-time, which Buffy would absolutely tell him just the second her brain cleared and the urge to crawl into his lap and let him take her back to the happy place vanished. Something that would be easier if he would just pull his mouth away, but he didn't. Instead, he brought his hands into play, cupping her cheek and holding her to him as he twisted so they were more directly facing each other. Tasting and nibbling and making more of those yummy sounds that were hers. All hers.

It was that thought that snapped her out of it—how good it felt, knowing it was the truth when it hadn't been just last night. When she'd thought, not too long ago, that it never would be. Buffy placed her hands on Spike's shoulders and gave him a firm shove, forcing their lips apart. He stared at her for a second before grinning again, this time rather goofily, like he was slaphappy.

"Sorry," he said, clearly not sorry at all.

"I don't *have* to tell you the story, you know."

"Mmm. Tempting, but I reckon this is the sorta thing I need to hear." He licked his lips while looking pointedly at hers. "Though be a lamb and tell it quick. Want to spread you out and do all sorts of—"

"Spike."

"What?"

"Just...with the distracting." Her cheeks burned, though not from embarrassment. No, the stuff pumping through her at the moment was pure nerve. Spike being all seductive wasn't going to make getting through parts of this any easier. "What happened involved a dark artifact Giles has at the shop. He got it so he could destroy it, but hasn't had any luck with that. It's a monkey's paw."

That did it, as she'd known it would. Spike was fully in the moment now. "A monkey's paw. Like the—"

"Yes, like *the*." At his look, she offered a shrug. "You've mentioned the story a couple of times. Well, not you-you. The other you."

"The one you shagged."

"Never gonna let that go, are you?"

"Dunno, pet. Should I?"

That was fair, she supposed, though it would make telling the story more difficult. For the moment, she decided to ignore it and continued as though there had been no interruption. "Meeting Angel was bad. I don't know what I thought. That I could just step back inside that relationship or...seeing him would make everything better. Part of it, I know, was that I had feelings for you—like massive, life-changey feelings—and I didn't know how to deal. But that's been the story since I... Since Heaven. Buffy, not knowing how to deal."

The glimmer in his eyes had faded, as had the snark. Spike swallowed, nodded. "Know it's been hard. Reckon you've been doin' the best you can—"

"But I haven't," she said quickly, then slumped. "Or maybe I have and my best is just way...not. I don't know. All I know is I haven't felt like Buffy and there are all these problems. The house falling apart, keeping Dawn, trying to get through each day without completely losing my head. I was trying my hand at retail to see if it's something I could possibly do with the non-slaying hours of my life."

"And?"

"A world of no. And that's before the mummy hand loop."

"Mummy hand what?" Spike leaned back, arching an eyebrow. "How many cursed appendages does this story have, Slayer?"

"Just the two," Buffy replied with a flat smile. "Customer wanted a mummy hand. I found the monkey's paw—and yes, before you start, I now know the only thing they have in common is being hand-shaped. Anya set me straight, told me what the paw was, that it wasn't for sale, and what it did. Though she doesn't remember doing any of that due to the aforementioned loop."

The look he gave her said plainly he hadn't followed any of that.

"Before I took the trip to the other world, the day had been of the awful," Buffy said. "I guess maybe we start there?"

It was something she hadn't done with the others, aside from dashing over the important bits. Even if she was trying to be Honesty Girl, she'd known too much detail would have led to a whole different discussion that she didn't think she could stomach having with them. Also didn't think she owed them. For instance, she hadn't talked about the hours going back and forth from the basement to the cash register, how she still wasn't sure how much time had actually been lost inside that loop. How she'd started thinking about killing herself then, not realizing what dangerous seeds she was planting.

But she did tell Spike. All of it and more. She told him about the start of the day on campus, how time had sped up and slowed down and how off-course everything else had been. She told him about working with Xander and the demon that had attacked and then melted, all Wicked Witch of the West-style. The mummy hand loop had just been the cherry on the crap sundae that was her life at the moment—a bad prologue to what had come after.

"Sounds like something's tryin' to test you," Spike said, leaning back on the bed, propped on an elbow. "Put you through the paces—see what you'll do. How you fight." He paused then, flashed her a guilty little grin. "It's what I'd do. Did, in fact, just a bit."

"What? When?"

"At the start. Didn't set up anythin' too elaborate or what all—took over that Anointed git's lackeys once the dust cleared and—"

"Wait." Buffy seized his wrist—the one not holding his fist against his head—and pressed her thumb into his skin. "The *Anointed One*? You're who took him out?"

"What, good news takes this long to travel?"

"How in the world did I not know this?"

"Not my fault you never bothered to ask." Spike searched her face for a beat, his eyebrows shooting skyward. "Never wondered where he went off to, did you?"

"I... No?" She scrunched up her nose in thought, earning little more than another grin from the vampire beside her, who gave her this look like she was the cutest thing he'd ever seen. "You showed up and it was out with the old baddies and in with the new. It never even occurred to me to ask what happened to little Damien-on-steroids."

"He was a bit cross when I bungled that St. Vigeous rot." He scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Too much bloody ceremony for my taste. Was never one for it, all that sodding pomp and circumstance, gits chanting at nothing and the like. Dru liked me to do it to make nice, so I played along for her sake and that was all. Always seemed to me like changing out one set of rules for another, when the entire point of being a vampire was making my own and sod all else."

Buffy smiled in spite of herself. "So...you took on the Anointed's lackeys?"

"Those I couldn't be bothered to dust, yeah. Good number of them I sent after you to see what you'd do, how you fought."

"But no mummy hand."

He snickered again but looked a bit pleased. "Always meant to take you on myself. Just you and me, fists and fangs. Knew it'd be a good fight. Best of my life." A soft, almost wistful sigh tumbled off his lips, as though he were watching it from a distance. And she remembered what the other Spike had said about fights, how he and his Buffy had recreated some of their more memorable brawls, only had them end in a slightly more Letter-to-Penthouse way than sudden-death. His Buffy, he'd said, had needed the fight after she'd gotten back. Needed to feel a bit of pain, for him to make it hurt. That was when she'd started asking for fangs, relishing that tiny flirt with death when it came.

Buffy suddenly knew a fight with Spike, the real, gritty kind, was in

her future. They would need to find a place to do it—preferably somewhere with a modicum of privacy for when it turned all super adult content. Maybe the mansion, if it was still standing and unoccupied.

Actually, that would be kinda hilarious.

The thought must have been one she'd telegraphed, for Spike suddenly snapped back to himself, blinking at her in surprise. "Slayer?"

"Just...mind wandered." Her cheeks warmed. Later. She'd tell Spike her plans to fight-fuck him later. It would just distract him now.

So she inhaled deeply and picked up in the Magic Box, how the mummy hand loop had started, and as she'd promised herself, she didn't *yadda yadda yadda* the bits that were important. She talked about her reflections on Angel, how the disappointment from that meeting had permeated everything, made her feel even more separated from her living self than had waking up in her coffin. Spike didn't care for this, she could tell, though he did an admirable job of trying to nod his way through it without making a face or rolling his eyes or muttering something under his nonexistent breath.

That was until she got to the part about making the actual wishes.

"Hold on," he said, sitting up. "You used the bloody thing? Powerful bit of dark magic, that. What the hell were you thinking?"

"I wasn't," Buffy replied. "The paw... Apparently, it works this voodoo on your brain if you're around it to get you to use it. But in this... I can't even explain it. I knew it was bad, that Giles wouldn't have it in a warded case or want to destroy it if it was anything *but* bad, but it was like there was this voice in my head saying, 'But is it as bad as living here?'" She looked away then, before she saw the words land. "So I thought about what would make it easier. If I didn't have to worry about money or Dawn being taken away. And I thought maybe, if Angel and I had... If we'd worked things out somehow, maybe I wouldn't be so miserable."

At that, she laughed. The sound tore from her without permission, harsh against the heavy, quiet air, startling her and making Spike tense, but she couldn't help it. Knowing what she knew now, laughter was the only appropriate response.

"That was it," she said. "Those were the wishes. Money, Dawn, Angel. And they were big enough to create a whole new world. Not all

wishes do. I'm not sure what the trigger is—if it's how you word the wish, but then I think someone told me that the paw even has influence on that. The guy who had the paw before Giles didn't create a new world." She was rambling again, hyper-aware of the fact that Spike was staring at her, feeling the weight of it even if she wasn't looking at him. He'd gone rigid the second she'd listed her wishes. "But you know the punchline. Monkey's paw demands a price. Spike—the other Spike—he thought that maybe it gets specific to the person in what the price is. What it senses will make the person break."

"You said you were with him," Spike said in a low voice, and maybe if she didn't know him as well as she did now, she wouldn't have heard the tremble. But she did know him and she did hear it. The one that told her he was doing all he could to keep a hold on his temper. "The other Spike."

"I was."

"Yeah? Must've been quite the arrangement you had with Angel, then. What'd you do, take turns?"

It took a second to understand what he was asking. "What? Gross, Spike, *no*." Buffy shook her head to banish the image suddenly crowding it. "No, I was married to Angel. He was human."

"Ooh, better and better."

Her own temper had pulsed to life, which would pretty much spell the end of the conversation if it went unchecked. Not that she didn't understand the jealousy in his voice, the hurt. Hell, she kept getting territorial thinking about him with another Buffy, knowing full well that was entirely illogical—not to mention hypocritical—but tell that to her illogical, hypocritical brain. "I told you there'd be things you don't want to hear."

"Yeah. Wagered it'd be all about you shagging the daylights outta some other Spike," he shot back. And now she did look at him—couldn't help herself. His nostrils flared and his jaw tight, *all* of him tight, a predator about to fight his way out of a corner. "Sorry if you throwin' bloody *Angel* into the mix—"

"Spike, it was terrible. I didn't so much as hold hands with Angel and there was definitely no *shagging*. The marriage was awful. Angel resented me and things at home were bad. I—the other Buffy felt

trapped. Like she couldn't get out of it because he was human. Because he *became* human and stayed human for her."

"*Became* human? How'd he manage that? Next you'll tell me the prat can walk on water."

She gritted her teeth, reminded herself that she did indeed love him, and tightened her grip on her patience. "Two years ago, after the Thanksgiving Day raid, I went to see Angel. Do you remember this?"

The question seemed to throw Spike out of his anger and the effect was somewhat mesmerizing—watching those hard lines soften, the angry slant in his brow become a confused furrow.

"There was a bear?" Buffy offered softly. "You really didn't like the bear."

Some of the haze cleared. He nodded. "Whole siege, right? The lot of you brassed off a pack of Indian ghosts?"

"Native Americans," she corrected, and rushed to continue before he could roll his eyes or say something else that upped the urge to hit him. "Angel was there the entire time, talking to Giles and in general doing the stalkery-ex thing where he got to do things his way. If you remember, the beans got all with the spilled over dinner and after, I went right up to LA to see him, give him a good chewing out. And if you look at the court transcripts, that's exactly what happened."

"But?"

"But...well, a lot." She waited a second, braced herself, then drew in a breath and forged ahead.

Talking about all things Angel with Spike was always going to be the hardest part of this but knowing that didn't do much to help. She heard herself as though from a distance going over the things she knew. How Angel had been turned human for a day, how he'd decided to turn back the clock to erase it, and how in a different world, a different Buffy had been able to convince him to not. That he'd stayed human, returned to Sunnydale with her, and fulfilled all those stupid, girlish fantasies she'd had when she'd been what seemed like a thousand years younger.

Then she got into the marriage itself—the popped bubble. The truth about what happily ever after with Angel looked like.

"He was at my house—our house, I guess—when I first saw him,"

Buffy said. "He didn't look like himself. He barely spoke to me at all. And I just didn't get it. Dawn was gone too. The wish... I can't remember what I said, but the result was she'd been shipped off to my dad after I died. I was trying to piece things together but it's not exactly easy to say, 'Hey, by the way, I just got here so can you give me a rundown of everything I've missed?' As it was, Angel didn't stick around long enough to answer any questions. So then I went to try to find Giles to see if he could make sense of anything. But Giles wasn't there. He was dead. Also because of me. Because I wished for money and that's how I got it." She released a trembling breath, felt her lower lip starting to wobble and knew she was seconds from losing it completely, which was *so stupid* because Giles was alive. She knew he was alive—she'd seen him earlier tonight. He'd been there the first time she'd told this story, even if not in all its gory detail. But just a few hours ago, she'd been in a world where he was not alive and never would be again. Even if the other Buffy had wanted to go home—and foolish or not, she trusted she had—there was no getting around the gaping loss that awaited her. "So that was it—my three wishes. Dawn, who was with my dad, Giles, who was dead, and Angel, who resented me but wouldn't leave."

She stopped talking, and once more the air around them became a pregnant sort of quiet. That was fine. Better than the alternative—better than him running his mouth and making this even more uncomfortable than it was already. After a beat, she drew in a deep breath and went on. Told him about the Magic Box and how Giles had left her everything and made Anya hate her as a result. About Wolfram and Hart and the offer they had issued to that world's Buffy, how she had been searching for the paw that her Giles had never gotten the chance to buy. And when she ran out of other things to tell him, she steeled herself and addressed the thing she knew he was waiting for.

"I can't tell you the whole story—the you and me story, that is," she said. "I only heard it once all the way through, the rest just in comments he would make. Honestly, it was a lot like what happened with me and Riley, I think, when it came down to it. Only worse because it was Angel. There were things that drove them apart, like

body swap things, but I think it came down to him not being strong enough or in control."

Spike huffed but didn't say anything. That was okay. She hadn't expected him to just let that statement go. Painful though it might be to hear, it was the truth. Whatever problems she'd had with Riley had always paled in comparison to the relationship pain that had been all things Angel. Part of that might have been that she'd closed herself off—but even if that was the case, it hadn't been intentional. It had been because she'd gotten a lesson in how someone could leave her feeling thoroughly beaten without ever throwing a punch.

That sort of bare vulnerability was something she'd only done once. And scary as it was, she wanted to try again. She wanted all of it.

"So the other Buffy and Spike became patrolling buddies," she continued. "And then eventually they became more than that. I... That was hard for me to understand. Not the *you* part but the *more while married* thing. I don't know if you know, but the reason Mom and Dad split was because he didn't really buy into the whole *fidelity* thing. I never thought that I... I mean, when Riley was getting his extracurricular on, that was one of the reasons it hurt so much."

At that, Spike ducked his head. "Always meant to apologize for that. Never could get the wording right."

"Apologize? Huh?"

"Well, yeah. For showin' you. Taking you there in the first place."

It took a moment to realize what he was saying—what he was referring to. Then she snickered, which took him by such obvious surprise that she laughed again. "Trust me. That's the sort of thing I want to know. No matter how much it hurts."

He worked his throat and offered a nod, lowering his head. "Thing of it is, pet, I took you there hopin' you'd ditch the git. Didn't think about the other end—the part where it'd hurt you—until it was over. Just reckoned you'd kick his arse all the way outta town and I wouldn't have to torture myself picturin' him all over you anymore."

"This is not the revelation you think it is," Buffy replied somewhat dryly. "I'm not sure what I thought your motives were at the time—honestly, I didn't think about that all that much. But after you made with the love declaration, a lot of things started to make sense. Like

the pile of butts under the tree in the front yard? Which, by the way, not allowed at Casa de Summers. We'll get you an ashtray and you'll use it."

A slightly dopey grin crossed his face. "Or what? You'll punish me?"

"In ways I promise you *won't* like. I can be both cruel and unusual." She paused. "Also? While we're on the subject of the reason Riley is an ex and not a current, cheat on me and dust."

That was enough to knock away his grin. Spike's jaw dropped, his eyes going saucer-sized. "Cheat? On *you?* Bloody hell, Slayer, what the hell do you—"

She shut him up with a kiss, one he returned with enthusiasm and more than a little bite, capturing her lower lip between his teeth and giving it a firm tug. Her body's response was immediate and intense, fresh desire kindling in the embers of their earlier lovemaking. When he groaned low in his throat, pushed his tongue into her mouth, she knew he sensed it—*scented* it, and though Buffy still wasn't sure how she felt about the fact that he would likely know her moods before she did from now until the apocalypse, she decided that, right now, she would find it all kinds of hot.

"I just thought I'd warn you," she murmured against his lips when they broke apart. "In case you got extra stupid."

"Can't bloody fathom stepping out on someone I love," he murmured in turn. "Especially you. Always been a one-woman bloke."

"Except the times Drusilla wanted you to not be."

He pulled back, a frown creasing his brow. "He tell you that? The other me?"

"Yeah. I can't remember the full context of the conversation, but that did come up. He was trying to make a point. About how he—*you* love. That you did stuff for Drusilla even if you didn't necessarily like it."

"Hate to have missed it."

There was no inflection in his voice so it would have been easy to just roll on by, but that still somewhat new Spike knowledge cautioned her against it. The same she hadn't even been sure she'd cultivated, as restrained as the other Spike had been in terms of what he shared with her. Still, knowing what it was didn't mean she knew how to defuse it,

so she decided to press on instead. Keep talking and hope that it would get easier as she went.

Only nothing about this was easy. Thinking about it, let alone putting any of it into words. Trusting that she was safe here, with him—that the memories couldn't hurt her, that exposing all of herself wasn't a mistake. Every time she'd opened up, her trust had been repaid with heartbreak and betrayal. She'd picked herself up so many times, pieced herself back together, and promised herself to do better. To fortify the parts of Buffy that were vulnerable so fully that no one would be able to get in again.

But she had to—for him and them. So she did. She told him about meeting Spike the first night, how he'd fucked her and she'd let him. That part of her had been waiting for *him* to do just that, find her and replace all the pain with something better, even if it was fleeting. How he'd bitten her without reservation, how tender he'd been afterward. More than tender—concerned. How she'd run home, fallen asleep waiting for Angel to return in the hopes of getting some answers, and how quickly it had become apparent that for as much as was different in that world, Spike was the same. Not only in terms of loving her but in how she felt around him. Safe in admitting who she was, even knowing he wouldn't react well. How she'd told him everything much in the same way she was telling Spike now—all the while wondering if the reason it had seemed easy to do so then was the fact that there had been no stakes; she'd had nothing to lose—and how he'd returned the favor.

Then the confusion that came with confronting the truth about life with Angel, about the life led by another version of herself. Her own reluctance to believe that Angel was really what Spike had said he was, that it wasn't a side effect of the wish as much as the plane going down had been. As she expected, Spike scoffed and opened his mouth to shoot what would have undoubtedly been a blistering rebuttal, and she had to hurry along to assure him that she knew that now. That facing that realization had been one of the first things she'd done, and it had left her feeling steamrolled and aimless, and something worse than alone. Knowing she was in a place where no one—not Angel, not even Spike—could really stand the sight of her. Angel because he

resented that he didn't love her anymore and Spike because he resented that he did.

"He let me in because I'm Buffy and he said he loved Buffy no matter what," she said, her voice a little scratchy now. "He made that perfectly clear. But he didn't want *me*. He wanted me gone and after so much... There's a reason you're the only one I told about Heaven and why I've come by every night, you know."

Spike didn't respond at first, his gaze pinned to the spread of comforter between them. Then, slowly, he nodded. "Yeah, reckon so."

"I didn't want to admit it. I knew I wanted you—I was trying to ignore that, but I knew it. When I was there, I couldn't ignore it anymore. I wanted you and you didn't want me. No one did. Once the others found out I wasn't their Buffy, that it was my wish that had gotten Giles killed?" She sniffed and looked away, back at the familiarly unfamiliar space around her. "And I started thinking about the other Buffy being here. We weren't sure if she was but Anya said it was possible. I started thinking about how happy she'd be here. No bad marriage, no dead watcher, no custody battle over Dawn. And you. She'd have you. Even worse, you'd have her. All of you would. This happier, better Buffy who you wouldn't want to trade back for the real thing. Or real-to-you thing."

Spike swelled at that, indignant, and she knew what he was going to say. She beat him to it.

"You don't know. The deal I made to come home means those days were erased for you. You might have—"

"Bollocks."

"Spike—"

"You really think I'd be happy playin' stand-in for anyone?" He held her gaze—she didn't even remember meeting it again, but he held it. Almost daring her to look away, which she didn't. "You think I wouldn't feel the exact same bloody way the bloke over there did?"

"A Buffy who was in love with you, though? Not afraid to show it?"

"She was afraid—have you been listening at all?" He shook his head, the hardness in his eyes softening, and again tucked that stubborn fallen hair behind her ear. "Bird was scared outta her mind. Maybe not of sayin' she loved me but making it mean something?

Somethin' outside of you and me? Was all tucked away, wasn't it? Nice and tidy."

"No, it wasn't like that." She wasn't sure why she felt the need to come to the other Buffy's defense, especially when she knew Spike was right, but she did. The situation hadn't been as straightforward as he seemed to believe. "She wanted to be with him. I know she did. There was too much there—"

"Want and doin' are different things, and not even the bloody point."

"What is the point?"

"Wager the same one your other Spike came to. That living with you, however he can get you, is better than living without. But up to me? I want you to want me the way I want you. That's not you lookin' at me and thinkin' about another bloke." He broke off, looked away, then back again. "Not sayin' I wouldn't be tempted. Not sayin' I'd say *no* if she offered, either. Her bein' you and all. But it wouldn't be what I wanted. I'd want to know that when you look at me, you see *me*. Not someone else." Another break. "Already worried enough that it might be that way for you, too."

"Me?"

"You were with another me, weren't you? Sure it wasn't him—"

Buffy didn't know what she planned to do until she did it—until she had his face between her hands and his mouth was on hers. And Spike didn't keep her waiting; he moaned and fell into her, over her, once again redefining her understanding of passion and want. Putting as much of himself into his kiss as she thought a person could—maybe even more because Spike was always crossing new thresholds and reforming the things she thought were possible. Letting her feel him, all of him, the parts she could see and those he kept buried. Love and wonder and joy alongside that fear he'd been about to voice and so much more. But kissing him wasn't the answer he deserved, much as she would like it to be. He needed what he gave, and even if it intimidated her, she would do her best to give him just that.

"The entire time I was there," Buffy panted after they broke apart, looking up into his beautiful, conflicted face, "I thought that. Even after we... I knew he would love me. I knew we could make it work.

But that's just the way he—*you* are, Spike. You would make it work. It wouldn't be the same but it could still be good. It mattered to him which Buffy he was with, and that meant he could never be mine. I like that too. That it mattered. That you love so much that you feel that way." She skated her lower lip over her teeth. "But I wanted it. The things going through my head about what was happening here and how I might not be wanted if we managed to find a way back, how I wasn't wanted there because I wasn't her... I wanted him to take that away. I wanted to feel wanted. But he wouldn't. He made it clear that she meant too much to him to use me or let me use him just because I happened to also be Buffy."

She'd known she wouldn't be able to get through this part without crying. Suddenly, Buffy needed up—needed air. Needed Spike to not be above her, looking at her with such tenderness. She pressed against his shoulders and he rolled away without hesitation, though the warmth in his gaze shifted to concern. Knowing—or assuming she knew—how he'd react to what came next didn't help matters any more than had knowing he loved her before she'd made the confession. The struggle was still in the saying, in the owning. In facing the thing that was inside of her and accepting that it would never go away. Spike could scoff all he liked but it wouldn't make her truth any less that. And she hoped he wouldn't. She needed him to understand this part of her too. Love it, best he could, ugly as it was.

Although, a rational, seductive voice reminded her that there was no reason to confess a damn thing. The crime that had been committed had happened in a world she would never see again, to a different Spike. She could make something up, tell him anything, and he would never know. Only part of him would, probably. Spike had always been able to sense things about herself before she did. And even if that weren't the case, lying—either by omission or outright—also wasn't an option. Not if she wanted this to work.

And Buffy more than wanted this to work.

"I was staying with him," she heard herself say. She was standing now, just outside of his reach. Spike had sat up and was regarding her still with that sees-too-much stare of his, making the art of maintaining eye contact a struggle all over again. "Every night except

one, I think. He slept with his jeans on. I took one side of the bed and he took the other, though he'd get all cuddly at some point and... There was a near miss before he was awake enough to remember that I wasn't his Buffy. And when he did remember, he pulled away. I didn't want him to pull away. He'd made me feel wanted and I was so lonely, Spike. It was worse than being here—I didn't have anything. I didn't have my friends or Dawn or Giles or you. But when he thought I was her, he wanted me and I wanted to feel that, even if it wasn't mine to feel. So I..." Buffy covered her mouth, trying hard to swallow the sob that wanted out, but it won. "I raped him."

The silence that followed these words—bold and ugly and true as they were—was almost absolute. Spike staring at her, his expression something beyond flabbergasted. The impact was both heartening and heartbreaking.

Finally, he blinked, shook his head and said, "You did *what* now?"

The frank disbelief in his voice gave her the absurd and terrible urge to laugh. She forced that back. "I raped him. He was still... *hard* from having thought I was the other Buffy so I tried to make him not care that it was me and not her. I put my mouth on him. It was only for a second but he—"

"Dunno what you've been tellin' yourself, but that's not—"

"It is, Spike. He said no. He was very clear about it. I didn't want to hear it. I wanted him to want me and I thought... I don't know what I thought. If I gave him a blowjob he'd wouldn't care? Because that's all she was to him? A giant sex doll? I knew that wasn't it. If it was, he would've jumped at the chance to fuck me the second I let him know I was willing." She wiped at her cheeks, but it was a losing battle at the moment. The tears kept coming. "I also knew because of you. Because you *did* have a Buffy sex doll and it wasn't enough for you. Dawn told me—all summer, with the Buffybot. How she'd keep making comments from her original programming and how you could hardly stand to be in the same room with her."

Spike sucked in his cheeks and looked away, the lines in his neck tight. And Buffy forged ahead, frantic to get this part over with. Hoping once it was done, she'd never have to talk about it again.

Would never feel compelled to, knowing that at least for the bad she'd done to this Spike, he hadn't seen her worst.

"He was so angry," she said, her voice wobbly. "Asked me if I thought it was that easy to replace her as he was throwing me out. It didn't really hit me, what I'd done, until I was outside and walking back to the house. And when I got there, I... Angel had this gun."

Spike stiffened, snapping his gaze back to her face, and she saw that he understood. Without having to hear the rest, he knew it. His eyes filled with horror and more than horror—pain and grief and all the other things she'd once denied him the ability to feel because of a lie she'd been told. It was as though, in that instant, he was there with her in the house. Watching her as she moved up the stairs, not knowing her intent or her destination until she made it. Finding the keepsake box the other Buffy kept stuffed full of Spike's love letters, finally *getting* it. The thing she'd tried to steal, realizing in full how one-sided their affair absolutely was not. Nearly suffocating under the crushing weight of guilt and isolation and disgust at this thing she'd become.

And she didn't have to try to articulate any of that. Spike knew. He knew, and she was so grateful she almost lost it for real.

"I didn't do it, obviously. But I... It was close. He came after me. Caught me as I was about to and... It was different after that. I'm not sure if it was just him realizing something or—"

"Christ, Buffy." Spike was on his feet the next instant, his hands around her face, thumbs caressing away the tears she couldn't stop crying. "Nearly lost you all over again. Would never have known, would I?"

She tried to respond but couldn't, shaking too hard to get anything out. He saw this too and pulled her into him, her wet cheek finding his cool chest. His arms around her, holding tight. As though the thing that had almost happened was lurking in the shadows, waiting to catch them both off guard. It wasn't, she knew, for she had left that in the other world as well. Back in some alley in Las Vegas alongside a couple of thugs who had thought they were in for a good night before she'd come along.

The thought triggered something, though, and before she could

catch up with herself, she was talking again, this time at a clip. Trying to remain ahead of it. Ahead of herself. "Spending time with him after that was what made me realize it. I knew he didn't want me so it was all honest. He didn't have anything to prove. We kept looking for ways to make the switch—get me home and her home. When I realized what I felt was love... It wasn't until after we both thought that there was no way to get home. I told him I loved him then because I never thought I'd get to say it to you. And that's what did it—what changed his mind about us. And we were together for a couple of days. Just a couple. Then we learned that there was a way back after all—I could make a deal and everything would go back. And we stopped being together like that."

Spike kissed her temple but didn't speak. Just let her talk. But she was almost talked out, at once aware of just how exhausted she was. How long she'd been awake, not counting the brief nap she'd enjoyed while waiting for him to come home. Sleep had found her then, but a fragmented sleep, one that insisted upon jolting her awake what felt like every few minutes to see if the scenery had changed. How she had remained asleep long enough for Spike to arrive, make himself comfortable, and light candles was anyone's guess.

"That's all," she said into his shoulder. "That's what happened. I mean, no, that's not all. There's more. But that's how it happened with us. And when they made the offer to come back, I could have said no —I could've stayed. But it wouldn't have been right. And I don't think he would have let me, anyway. I think the only reason he didn't jump at it was he was worried about what his Buffy would say when she found out that he'd been with me at all. He felt so bad about that. It would've worked, but it would've been hard. Harder than either of us thought. I just... I wanted..."

Then he did speak, his voice a warm hug. "It's all right, pet. Don't need any more just now."

"Y-you don't?"

"Nah. Wager I know the important bits, yeah? Know what brought you here." He pressed another kiss across her temple, then up along her brow. "I'm sorry for being a pillock."

"Huh?"

"'Bout him. This other me. For not... Wasn't thinkin', was I? Just had this picture of you goin' over there and suddenly bein'... Don't like thinking of you with anyone, is all."

Buffy nodded. "It's okay. I've been way with the jealous too. And I don't even know if you and that Buffy did anything." That she would never know for sure was a blessing and a curse. And it didn't matter. Whatever might or might not have happened had been reset.

"Was a bit of a git about bloody Angel, too." Spike stepped back, pulling her with him, then sat again on the edge of the bed and encouraged her to do the same. She did, blinking tired, swollen eyes, resting her head against his shoulder. "You being off with him last night was torture enough. Tellin' me you wished for him?"

"It was a stupid wish."

"I'll bloody say."

"But I'm glad I made it." She sniffed and lifted her head to meet his gaze, offered a wobbly smile when she caught his surprise. "The magic that sent me back... I'll tell you that stuff later, but it would have wiped my memory of everything that happened there. If I'd gone through with it like that, it'd be like I never had made that wish and it would've been for nothing."

There was more she wanted to say. A lot more. That knowing the worst parts of herself, hard as it was, also helped her in realizing all the parts that were good and pure and Buffy. Still Buffy. She hadn't left them in the grave after all. And the good days she had were worth the price of living. It might not be easy—hell, she knew it wouldn't be. She'd told Dawn that living was the hardest part and she'd been right. But that understanding she'd brought back with her from the Vegas alley remained firm and bright, and ready for her to lean on whenever the need arose. Along with the people who loved her. Her friends, her sister, her watcher, and Spike.

"Is it okay if I sleep now?" she asked, placing her head on his shoulder again. "I hope so, 'cause I'm gonna."

She grinned at the low rumble of his chuckle, her eyes fighting a losing battle to keep open. As it was, it was all the response she got before the tendrils of sleep captured her for good and pulled her under.

She awoke in a familiar place. A *home* place. Tucked against his cool, firm chest, his arm around her middle to pull her into him, one of his legs between hers, tangling them together. There was no slow drift between the sleeping world and the waking one, no jolt of memory to remind her where she was, which both surprised her and didn't. Her mind also didn't play hide-and-seek with the previous night's details. It was all there, and even the parts that were bad were good.

In fact, the only thing missing was something she didn't miss at all. A thing that she hadn't realized, until that moment, had been there to greet her every morning. Or afternoon. Or whenever it was that Spike would start nibbling on her neck and rolling his hips in greeting. Even the mornings where it had truly just been them, when he'd loved her and she'd loved him and the complications of that love had been easy to ignore, Buffy had felt it. An undercurrent of disquiet, of impermanence, of not belonging.

Maybe it would have faded with time. Maybe not. But that didn't matter. That feeling wasn't here now. Not even its ghost.

It was just good.

As though he'd heard the thought, Spike tugged her more firmly against his chest, his breath a little explosion at her ear.

"Still love me, Slayer?"

And there it was. The difference. The line separating what had been and what would be. She could hear it in his voice as it warmed over her skin, feel it in the way he gripped her. The want there, the need. Not just for Buffy but for *her*. It was all there inside him. And so was she.

"I do."

"Know which one you're with?"

She nodded, trailing her fingertips down his forearm until she was drawing patterns around his knuckles. "You the one who counted the days?"

"Wager we both did."

"Yeah, but only one of you held my hands and told me so."

He drew in a sharp breath. "Did at that."

Yeah, he had. He'd held her hands and looked at her with awe and wonder and more. And last night he'd done it all over again, even through the bits that weren't so pretty or easy to discuss. There was more yet to tell him, of course, and she would when he asked or when it felt right. Maybe later today over breakfast—he wouldn't have anything fit for human eating in his crypt, but she bet he'd start keeping a healthy stock once she told him about the Buffy-friendly kitchen. She also bet he'd harass Xander into building her a shower, too, once she mentioned its existence.

Though those were pieces of a relationship that had been kept in the dark. Something this one would never be.

At last, Buffy twisted so she could see his face, his eyes. All him. All her Spike. Just hers. "Then I'm right where I want to be."

He smiled, and the smile was love.

"That's good, then," he said, and kissed her.

31

I'VE BURIED IT ALL AND I'M DANCING ON MY OWN GRAVE

Eleven months later

There were many perks to being Buffy Summers, one of the topmost being her daily wakeup call, which came in the form of his lips along her neck as he growled into her skin and rocked his hips against her ass. It wasn't every morning, but it was *most* mornings, and even the ones where they didn't enjoy some pre-work nookie were nothing to sneeze at.

This morning was a nookie morning. Already she was hot and throbbing between her legs, her body always aware of him even when she was in slumberland. Call that a slayer perk—some part of her never went completely to sleep around him, but had likewise learned that this particular vampire was a different kind of predator. The kind that slid his fingers from her thigh up her side until he had her breast cradled in his palm, lighting her skin on fire and infusing her with pure want. She felt his mouth curve into a grin when she sighed and arched more fully against his hand, her pulse jumping as the rest of her came awake. Call her crazy, but there was something about getting her vampire's mouth that close to her neck that just did it for her.

"Good morning," she said, lifting one of her legs to curl around his. "How much time do we have?"

"Not enough," Spike replied and nipped at her neck again. "Someone was saucy and kept me up too late."

"Someone's a vampire and would've been up anyway."

"No point in bein' up if you're not."

Buffy snickered, even if she couldn't stop grinning, and thrust herself back against him. "You can be awake without me."

"Painfully dull, that. Much better when I can spend my time doin' this." He abandoned her breast to trail his fingertips down her belly, then lower until he was skating through the curls at her mound. The sigh he breathed into her neck was the sound of happy, and it made her whimper just as much as those faint touches.

"Never get over how hot you are," Spike murmured, and she believed it. He told her often enough.

Buffy rolled her hips again, letting out a little sigh of her own when his cock slid along her ass, the damp tip trailing a cool path across her burning skin. "I thought we didn't have a lot of time. You gonna send me to work with a smile or what?"

His answer came in the form of a growl, as she'd known it would. Then he was there, parting her wet flesh with his cock, rubbing up her slit once, twice, three times before he notched himself at the mouth of her pussy. "You gonna be quiet?" he rumbled.

In all likelihood? No. And she'd given up trying. Even when he covered her mouth, it was no good, as she'd end up biting his palm and making *him* roar so much the walls shook. And while the soundproofing spell the witches had worked spared innocent ears from hearing things they shouldn't, it did not prevent wall or floor rattleage. A point Dawn had not-so-discreetly made on more than one occasion.

At least the rattling walls didn't come with a porno soundtrack anymore, though Buffy still sometimes experienced a rush of guilt after screaming herself hoarse just a few feet down the hall from where her impressionable sister slept. That everyone knew the reason for the soundproofing spell didn't help matters.

Still, she was a responsible parental-type who needed to set a good example. Or something. It was hard to care when Spike sank inside of

her, biting into her neck with his human teeth. The vibrations of his accompanying moan seemed to trigger something primal, and she arched back into him, gasped when he responded with a particularly sharp thrust, and then they were off to the races. Moving together in tandem, in silent—and sometimes, not-so-silent—competition to see who could get the other off first.

She hated to admit it, but Spike had the edge there. First, there was the way he pumped into her, with an urgency that edged on desperation. She didn't know how he managed—how he could always seem so starved for her even after almost a year together, but he did, and she loved it. Loved how he looked at her, how he touched her, the little smirks he'd fire her way when she said something that tickled him or made his exceptionally filthy mind go to an even filthier place. He was always pulling her into closets or pushing her against walls, sometimes for a quick romp but more often just to kiss her breathless. The heady sensation of being someone's addiction, of feeling the way he wanted and needed and loved, was its own aphrodisiac.

Then there was the way he stroked her, how he'd learned what to touch and when, how he'd flirt with her clit, spread her wetness all over, then nudge or press down at just the right moment. And the low rumble of his voice at her ear, muttering how good she felt, how beautiful she was, how much he loved her, how he was the luckiest bloke on the bloody planet, to have this every day.

Little, however, could compare to his own personal coup de grace. Getting her to the point where her body was on fire and building and building and building, and they both knew what would send her over. He gave every time but preferred her to ask first. Something about getting the Slayer to beg for his fangs being a point of pride. She didn't always capitulate, and Spike wasn't always patient enough to see it through—and there was something in that, too, driving him so crazy he caved to his own seductions—but getting to that moment was a fight all on its own, and one she was happy to lose.

But there *were* times Buffy managed to send him over first, either by scratching or biting him the right way or whispering something she wanted him to do. Occasionally sliding her fingers in places she'd never considered sliding them before, whispering that she loved his cock—

he was particularly fond of that one. And sometimes just by holding his eyes and saying the words.

That was her favorite—when Spike lost control because she loved him. That he could get off on her love alone.

Of course, he hardly minded when she got him off in other ways. Like at the present, when she pulled herself off his cock long enough to push him onto his back and cast herself astride his hips. When they were face-to-face and he could see her eyes, watch as she took him back inside her, as she rode him. But then he liked wrestling for control almost as much as he liked conceding it—he'd throw his head back and pant and whisper his encouragement, beg her to squeeze him tight with that *bloody magnificent cunt* of hers, cupping her breasts or her ass or, well, anywhere. He couldn't seem to touch her enough. Never could, though she loved that he tried. Loved the feel of his cool skin along hers when her own was sizzling. How he lapped at her sweat the same way he did her blood and her pussy, how he seemed to revel in her humanity and how it all just *worked.*

And she also loved it when he decided control was something he wanted to fight for after all. Buffy gasped and clawed at his chest for purchase, earning a snarl that had her squeezing her thighs around his hips—squeezing something else, too. Then the mattress was at her back, and he was over her, braced on his elbows and staring into her face as he pumped into her pussy, hips rolling, his throat strained, his eyes dark and his lips parted. She linked her arms around his neck and pulled him down into a kiss that was less a kiss and more outright war of tongue and teeth, attempting to muffle the small moans he knocked out of her with little success. Closer and closer, whimpering when he whispered that she should touch herself, grinning when *he* whimpered for the way she teased his dick with her fingers before turning her attention to her clit. Trying to get him there first just to be ornery, knowing she didn't have time because of what would happen after but wanting it anyway. And maybe—no, definitely—knowing that the best part was yet to come. Watching as the bones in his face shifted, his fangs descending, then that predatory gleam in his eyes before he sliced into the mark at her throat.

After, lying on her back, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her

breath, Spike purring like a big jungle cat, sleepy and content and trying to cuddle up beside her. Buffy realizing that she was going to be late, again, and trying to wrestle up some irritation at the fact. Knowing she couldn't because, well, she just couldn't. She enjoyed it too much.

That was until Spike nudged her with his head and muttered, "That'll be three times this week, pet. Better get a move on." *Then*, irritation wasn't such a reach. Especially when the vampire she was leaving in her bed had the luxury of going back to sleep.

The jerk was *so* lucky she loved him.

But then again, so was she.

THERE HAD, of course, been growing pains. Resistance among the Scoobies—not much, and none that she'd tolerated, and all mostly in the form of particularly stabby verbal barbs, but resistance nonetheless. Even so, that much had been easy to handle. Less easy were the complications of developing a life that was theirs, not modeled off any example she might have caught glimpses of during her sojourn in the other world. Fights that would arise not from a place of actual anger, but jealousy that couldn't be banished in a single night. Times when Buffy would mention something that Spike hadn't known she knew, when her memories would get confused between the first Spike she'd been with and the one she planned to spend her life with. When the reminder that her history with him was more multi-faceted than his with her.

But those fights never lasted, nor did the jealousy. They were fleeting shadows of insecurities she alone hadn't given him. And hey, she had her own wounds from relationships past, ones occasionally he paid the price for in turn, as tearing down the wall she'd built around herself wasn't as easy as she'd hoped. There was no great emotional sledgehammer, and no amount of realizing how deep those cuts actually ran made them easier to heal. It wasn't often, but sometimes it would take getting into a fight with Spike to realize the thing that she was fighting wasn't him at all, rather fears that even he couldn't wish

away. That beneath everything, even all she knew, she still felt it possible that she could push him so hard he'd decide she wasn't worth it and leave.

Only leaving was something Spike would never do. She knew that, regardless of the lies the less logical side of her brain tried to feed her. And Spike didn't mind the opportunity to reassure her, no matter how many times the fear surfaced. Fighting her was a turn-on, he said. Even when she was driving him out of his mind. There might be times he came close to hating her, the way passionate people did in the heat of the moment, but never a second in which he didn't love her with everything he was. It was messy and chaotic, and no one understood it but them, but it was also the best thing in her life and *that* was what mattered.

Likewise, their relationship didn't look anything like the one she'd glimpsed in the other world. There were no secret rendezvous, no notes exchanged, no elaborate crypt remodels or anything of the sort. As it was, the crypt hadn't remained Spike's home too long after she'd returned—Buffy had quickly deduced that if Revello Drive was her financial responsibility, then she should have the first and final decision over who got to call it home. That meant evaluating the people who were the most important to her, who she felt she could truly be herself around, and prioritizing them over all else.

She'd walked a little funny for a couple of days after she'd asked Spike if he wanted to move in. Her fault, he'd told her, for if she thought she needed to ask, he needed to make sure she was certain of his answer.

He'd more than succeeded.

And through all this, Buffy couldn't say she didn't ever think about the other Spike or his Buffy. She did, in fact, all the time. Doing laundry, between calls at work, sometimes at the Bronze as Spike twirled her or made her laugh or annoyed her so much she needed distance to remind herself she loved him—she'd think about the other Spike then. About the things he'd told her, shared with her, about his imperfect life with the woman he loved. There would be flashes of curiosity, wondering exactly what they were doing now, how that world's Buffy had reacted to the world she'd been returned to. How she'd reacted to

the letter, how she viewed her experience in another Sunnydale, and if it had been enough to convince her to close the gap where Spike was concerned. That living in secret, even happily, was nothing to living out with others. Most of all, hoping that her instincts were good and that things were as she'd thought they would be when she left. Remembering something that Spike had said while they'd sped down the highway toward Las Vegas, that he liked the thought of her returning home to her Spike, starting something with him because he knew that no one would love her better. Wanting to be able to say the same for herself, even when he drove her out of her mind.

She was thinking about them that night when she got off work, for her job was one that she wasn't sure she would have considered were it not for one of the final conversations she'd had with that Spike. Taking emergency calls all day wasn't exactly the glamorous career she'd once envisioned for herself, but it was steady, paid decent money, and earned her all kinds of points with Social Services. It was also more than a little useful when it came to balancing her *other* job—the unpaid sacred duty. All in all, a win across the board.

Though some days, like today, it still found new and exciting ways to suck beyond the telling of it.

"Hey, Buff!" Xander said brightly after she and Spike negotiated their way through the throng of people crowding the Bronze and toward the Scooby-filled table. "Captain Peroxide," he added in a dry tone that Buffy suspected was to convey apathy but had, over recent months, turned into something more like, *let's not acknowledge we're secret friends*.

"Harris," Spike answered in kind, pulling out a seat for her. "'Nother day I see you've managed to go without nailin' yourself to a wall, or summat."

Anya snickered, and Buffy was pleased to hear only a little actual disdain in the sound. Hell, that Anya was sitting at the table with them at all was a win all on its own—things after the failed wedding had been more than a little awkward, but the hope was that time and distance would heal the harshest of the wounds and get the failed lovebirds into a place where they could assess what had gone wrong in their relationship and see if there was any way to make it go right.

Less helpful when Anya laughed at Xander's pain, but as the jilted bride, she was probably owed that much. That the nail-gun incident had taken place immediately following the not-a-wedding likely made it extra satisfying.

"I know I wasn't there," Tara volunteered, making a face, "but every time you guys bring it up, I get strong sympathy pain in my toe."

Willow frowned and rubbed her girlfriend's back. "Poor Tara's toe. Kiss it and make it better?"

Tara went a bit pink but grinned all the same and winked.

"You all are missing the point. It was one time with the nail-gun. *One time*." Xander sighed and shook his head, then turned back to Buffy. "What happens on a job site stays on a job site. Is nothing sacred?"

Buffy shrugged, reached for the communal basket of fries in the middle of the table. "Like the love between a man and his nail-gun?"

"You're going to be absolutely no help, aren't you?"

"It's not looking that way, no. And come on, it was kinda funny." And by virtue of the fact that she'd been the one to take the 911 call when it had come through, she'd known ahead of everyone else and hadn't hesitated to blab.

"*Funny* is not the word I'd use. And on top of getting stabbed with a nail, I had to get a Tetanus shot." He scoffed as though this point superseded all others. "That day was full of pain."

"Sympathy pain," Tara agreed with a hard nod.

"That's what happens when they give trained monkeys access to power tools," Spike replied dryly.

Xander fixed on his patented I-hate-everything-with-fangs scowl. "Bite me, Bleach Boy."

"Get it through your head, Harris. You're just not that appetizing." Spike chuckled and pressed a kiss to Buffy's temple before rounding the table to head to the bar. "Want the usual, pet?"

"After the day I've had? I think I need something stronger than the usual."

"Whatever my lady desires."

What his lady desired was to take a long, hot soak in the tub to get her muscles nice and relaxed for one of his killer backrubs—the

sort that would hopefully turn into a full body rub, happy ending included.

"Oh no." Willow snagged a fry. "What happened?"

"Stupid human-demon politics," Buffy muttered, trying to shudder off the foul mood that had chased her home from work. "Long story short, some peaceful demons that were alive yesterday are now majorly dead and no one seems to give a damn but me. And Spike, since they were clients of his and hadn't yet made the final payment." This explanation earned nothing but another series of blank looks, and though she had promised herself not to spend the evening complaining about work, she could see that a good rant was in order of the time-honored tradition of working stiffs worldwide.

Even though her identity as the Slayer was not so much a secret as it was common knowledge among law enforcement—which granted her a great deal of leeway whenever a call came through that she knew the boys in blue were ill-equipped to handle—there were times her boss thought Buffy was being jumpy. Not everything, after all, could be a demon or a poltergeist or a vampire. Some things were just plain ole humans being awful to one another. So when she'd gotten a call that was coded as a domestic disturbance, the fact that she knew the neighborhood well and had reason to think it might be something else hadn't been enough to persuade her superiors to let her scope out the scene. Her argument that her vampire boyfriend—who paid half of her bills by moving items in and out of Sunnydale on behalf of the peaceful demon population—had a client in the area, one indebted to a not-so-peaceful demon gang, had been ignored. After all, demons killing demons wasn't cause for concern. The Sunnydale PD only cared about one type of citizen. Even if the demon who might be in trouble was the sort that paid taxes, volunteered at homeless shelters, and sang bass in their church choir.

After waffling for a few minutes, Buffy had decided to run by the house anyway. Just to make sure. But it had been too late—Spike was down a customer and she'd gotten her ass chewed out for leaving without notice.

It was days like this that she had to remind herself of the benefits of what she did. That her job was the reason Warren Mears was behind

bars, for example, and hadn't been able to do anything worse than use a freeze ray gun on a kindly old security guard. And that when Riley had come to town, she'd known where to find the thing he and the missus were hunting. Okay, fair, that had been mostly Spike, seeing as he was the one who had moved the Suvolte eggs into Sunnydale after being fed a convincing lie as to their purpose by a now-slain client. But Buffy's job had at least given her a heads-up when Mama Suvolte had started rampaging through the streets in search of her missing children.

After that incident, Buffy had insisted that Spike research any special request demon item he wasn't familiar with before moving forward, no matter how good the money was. He'd been pissed—mostly at himself—and agreed, though it meant turning down some serious do-re-mi. Sometimes, serious enough that Buffy flirted with the idea of telling Spike to take the cash before she slayed the client and—if necessary—the item in question, but then no one would do business with him at all and that would defeat the purpose. Being local demons' go-to guy was something Spike was seriously good at. It also gave him power that he'd been sorely lacking since the chip and reestablished his status as one of the most powerful players in Sunnydale. That their work occasionally complemented each other, as it had in the case of the Suvolte eggs, was just a bonus. So no, Buffy wouldn't be quitting—she wouldn't be fired, either; they knew how valuable she was so she kinda had ultimate job security—but today would go down in the books as a harder day to walk off than others.

Ergo extra-strength booze and full-body rubdowns care of her super skillful boyfriend.

Spike returned just as she wrapped up sharing her work frustrations, holding a couple of bottles of beer and a glass of some amber liquid she knew she wouldn't like but would drink anyway. "Here you are, love," he said, plopping the glass in front of her. "Put a few hairs on your chest."

Buffy wrinkled her nose, eyeing the drink with more scrutiny. "And hairy chest Buffy is a good thing?"

"I'll treasure every single one of them," he said, and kissed her temple as he slid onto the stool beside her.

"Aww," Tara muttered. Then, when Willow shot her a look, shrugged and said, "Well, it's sweet."

Sweet it might be, but Spike's response wasn't exactly the reassurance Buffy had been looking for. She was much more in agreement with Xander, who was miming vomiting into his hands. "I like my chest the way it is," she said, nudging the glass away. "Thought you did too."

Spike sighed and rolled his head back, as she'd known he would. Also as she'd known he would, he edged the glass toward her again with enough force that a bit splashed over the side, assaulting her nostrils with a strong perfume of alcohol. "It's a bloody saying, Slayer. Don't get all dainty on me."

"There are very few alcohols that will actually put hair on your chest," Anya added helpfully. "All demon-made, of course, and very hard to come by. I tried to get Xander to drink one at one time, as I prefer my men a little burlier and less Ken-doll smooth. His eyes became all drippy and he coughed for about a half-hour. Only one measly chest-hair to speak of, too."

Xander groaned. "Ahn, it's bad enough you told those stories while we were dating."

"Ex's prerogative," she retorted stiffly, crossing her arms and looking away. Though there was a slight curve to her lips that Buffy couldn't help but notice. And call her crazy, or maybe a sappy romantic, but the existence of that slight curve gave her hope.

Though hope of this nature was a fickle, skittish creature best kept on the sidelines. So when Willow offered the change of subject, Buffy was glad to take it. Let Xander and Anya exchange a few long looks while everyone else was discussing something else.

"Have you heard from Giles?" the witch asked.

"There was a message on the machine from him when we got home, but he wasn't in when I tried to call back," Buffy replied, slowly scooting the glass full of hair-on-chest-putting booze closer, ignoring Spike's smirk as she did. "Nothing new. Just he's tracked down a couple more girls."

Xander leaned forward, elbows on the table. "The girls we think are potential slayers?"

"The very same," Buffy said. This topic wasn't exactly one she wanted to spend a ton of time on, either, mainly because it was so very out of her control and there was nothing she could do about it. It had taken Giles several months to track down a copy of the prophecy that had been at the crux of the deal that had sent her back from the other world, and since then, he'd been elbow-deep in his own research as to possible interpretations aside from the literal one. Nothing concrete had emerged thus far, though he thought it very likely that Wolfram and Hart knew that the prophecy dealt with something other than actual biological children; that they had made the deal less to stop it from being fulfilled, but to have a part of Buffy in their back pocket that they could use to negotiate with her down the road.

Joke was on them if that was the case. In the slow process that had been piecing herself back together, Buffy still hadn't had the urge to pick up the block labeled *motherhood*, and call her cynical, but she didn't see that changing. Plus, as far as they knew, neither the Wolfram and Hart in this world or the other one knew that Buffy had come back with a full set of memories, care of Wesley's demon friend. Advantage Team Good Guys, and one she intended to hold tight.

The other part was, of course, the hundred-year thing, and what that meant for her long-term future. As a result, there had been a few hard discussions with Willow about her abuse of magic following the Heaven reveal, as well as a thorough investigation into the spell that had raised Buffy from the dead, its exact wording, and where it had gone wrong. Everything Giles had uncovered suggested that the *life* part might be of the everlasting variety, something Buffy tried not to think about too much but found hard to ignore all the same, especially when the cuts, scrapes, and bruises she endured on patrol healed up practically overnight. Slayers were fast healers, yes, but usually not *that* fast. Usually.

One night she'd been unable to find sleep, her mind overfull with images of herself alone in a world of flying cars and colonies on Mars and beyond, her friends and family long gone. Spike, who was still doing his best to not bask in his glee at the news, had reminded her that she would never be alone. Nowhere she would go that he wouldn't follow, after all, and she was daft for thinking otherwise. He'd also

given her the view on eternity that he said kept the thought from becoming the sort one could drown inside. That was that *forever* as a concept was too large, too endless for the brain to wrap itself around. The way he did it was take each day as it was—which, aside from explaining why his plans so often went up in smoke, was a philosophy that Buffy had decided to embrace. And count her lucky stars that if she did have to stare down the infinite, she wasn't doing it alone. That she never would.

The thing she clung to the most, though, was the reminder he'd given her that nothing in their world ever really died—that life was measured by different planes of existence, as she should know better than anyone. If it came down to switching which plane they were living on, that was something they could suss out together. He stressed the *together* part rather hard, and she realized he was right. If life was truly eternal, she wanted him to go wherever she went. And they had time to figure out the where and how. All the time.

It had been in the middle of all the research tied to the Slayer and her power that Giles had received word that two girls believed to be potential slayers had turned up dead. One stabbed in the gut, the other thrown off a roof. No suspects in either case. Even so, the Watchers Council declared there was nothing to worry about, as both girls had lived in less-than-safe neighborhoods. Their deaths were tragic, to be sure, and timed unnervingly close, but otherwise random.

That had been the party line until the third, fourth, and fifth potential had turned up dead. Buffy still wasn't sure what the official story was, only that Giles had been pulled off the prophecy research to round up the other girls on the list. What would happen next with any of them was anyone's guess.

Except Buffy had a feeling that she and the others might be about to suffer the repercussions of having gone a year without an apocalypse.

"Do you think Giles will come here with them?" Willow asked, jarring Buffy back to the present. "The potential slayers, at least? I mean, if someone's gonna keep them safe—"

"Survey says that someone is us," Buffy agreed. Then she decided

she was done with shoptalk. "But guys, seriously. I really just wanna boogie, take advantage of the fact that Dawn is staying with Janice—"

"For real this time?" Tara asked.

"Better bloody believe it," Spike drawled before throwing back a hearty swig of his beer. "Walked her there myself. Told her if she or her little chum decide to get creative and sneak out, she can expect me to greet every bloke she brings home from here until she's old and gray with my fangs out. Nibblet knows better than to think I'm bluffing, too."

Buffy snickered, then giggled when he shot her a bemused look. "Like we don't all know you're the one who taught her how to sneak out."

"Excuse me, Slayer, believe she got that from you. All the times you wiggled outta that window of yours?" Spike shook his head, shot the others a do-you-see-what-she-tries-to-blame-on-me look. "Girl's a Summers through and through. Bloody headstrong and bugger the rules."

He had a point, but that didn't mean she would let him win without a fight. "Like that doesn't also describe you."

"Never said it didn't."

"And *I'm* not the one who will be disappointed if she doesn't try to sneak out anyway."

A small grin flirted with his lips, and he lifted a shoulder. "Got me there." He gave her a wink—one full of promise and love and more besides—then nodded at the glass she had yet to touch. "Gonna tell me I wasted my hard-earned dosh on that? You said you wanted somethin' with a kick."

Right. The drink. It was still there. Buffy drew in a deep breath, turned her gaze back to the glass, and straightened her shoulders. "If this puts actual hair on my chest, you only have yourself to blame."

The grin turned into the patented Spike smirk. "I'll take my chances."

She poked her tongue out at him, inhaled deeply, and threw back a moderate gulp. Immediately, her sinuses flared to life; her throat burned, and her eyes watered, and she had to fight the urge to shoot it back the other way—a common side-effect of the booze he coaxed her

into trying. Even so, it wasn't the worst drink he'd ever shoved under her nose. Not something she would ever request again, but in terms of intent, it got the job done. A pleasant warmth spread across her skin, the edges of the day she'd survived going soft and round. She couldn't help the face she pulled any more than she could the shudder, but she wasn't surprised to find him regarding her with that adoring look—the one that made her feel like something greater than the center of the universe. His universe, at least. And that look finished off what the alcohol couldn't.

"All right, vampire mine," Buffy said, slamming the glass onto the table hard enough it cracked. "You owe me a dance."

Spike took her hand, kissed the back of it. "By all means, Slayer, let's show them how it's done."

He tugged her away from the others as she giggled, then pulled her to him, flush against his chest, and together, they proceeded to show the whole damn Bronze how it was done.

Same way they always did.

SEE, this was why one did not make out with a vampire while on patrol, especially after two beers and the mystery stuff she'd put away back at the Bronze. Dancing plus liquor plus sexy-as-sin boyfriend equaled Needy Buffy, and Spike was all kinds of lousy at saying no to Needy Buffy. In fact, if one were to ask him, she was sure he'd say that Needy Buffy was one of his favorite Buffys. Needy Buffy got giggly and extra affectionate with the touches and kisses, and said things like, "I wanna suck your dick." This typically led to hot, moany sounds from both of them, and a general melting of their environment because, who the hell cared that they were in a graveyard? Spike had fucked her against a good number of these mausoleums, and no one had complained. At least, no one had lived long enough for their complaint to matter.

Just turned out that tonight was a perfect storm of inebriation and hormones gone wild, and some newly risen twerp had taken advantage.

Which was why Buffy was currently on the ground, blinking up at

the curtain of stars through leafy branches, while Spike cursed loudly somewhere in the distance.

Seriously, what was with this day? Maybe the morning nookie had thrown everything off.

Well, if this is the price I have to pay, then I'll just deal.

"Slayer?" Spike called. "Plannin' on joining the party anytime soon?"

She'd be happy to once her head stopped spinning. "Why?" she called back, pressing her palm against her brow. "Having trouble?"

"With this pissant?" Her boyfriend let out a whoop of laughter, and the sound of fists meeting flesh hit the air. "Hardly even worth the effort. Just don't want you complainin' later that I took your kill or summat."

"Yeah, because that's something you'd never do," Buffy shot back.

"You want it, love, you gotta work for it."

"Maybe next time don't distract me."

"Right. It's my fault you offered to give me a blowie. Who distracted who?"

"She did?" That was a different voice—one presumably belonging to the pissant—and god, she'd been knocked over by a dweeb vampire. One who now sounded downright giddy, like he could take a number and wait his turn. Spike would never let her live this down. "We don't have to fight at all, you know. If you don't wanna. I'm not unreasonable here. We could..."

Ugh. Buffy wrinkled her nose and rolled over to climb to her feet, not feeling steady enough to do the acrobatic flippy thing she knew Spike liked to watch. And not because the dweeby vamp had hit her hard or anything. Nope. The alcohol was doing most of her enemy's work for him tonight. Her fault for assuming the quiet streak that had plagued the last week of patrol would continue—that she could let her guard down for five seconds and have a little fun. Such was the life of the Slayer.

"Sorry, mate," Spike said cheerfully, not sorry at all, and punched Mr. We Don't Need to Fight with enthusiasm. "This here's a party of two. You ruined what was a right nice time."

"Hey," whined the dweeb. "I was just asking. No need to go all purity police on me."

Her vampire scoffed in response, and she felt more than saw him turn once more in her direction. "Last chance, love."

"Oh, just kill him already." Buffy was still trying on her hands and knees. She hadn't quite managed to convince her legs to stop shaking. "I wanna go home."

"Hey!" cried the twerp. But that was as far as he got. There was the telltale crunch of a stake breaking through bone, that breath between life and death, then an explosion of dust. Buffy looked up just in time to catch Spike's self-satisfied grin as he tucked the stake back into his pocket.

"Only thing better than a blowie from my lady is a spot of violence to whet the appetite."

"Oh, shut up."

He answered this with a low chuckle. "Poor little love. Hit the sauce a mite too hard, didn't you?"

"And whose fault was that?" Buffy snapped, her arms starting to shake with the effort of holding herself up. "What the hell did you give me?"

"A right good time, if I recall correctly. Not my fault you don't know how to hold your liquor."

"I hold it just fine."

Spike rumbled another laugh, curled his hands around her upper arms. Then the ground and the sky were moving, *she* was moving, her toes dragging along the rough earth. Everything threatened to go topsy-turvy again but thankfully didn't do more than give a little wobble.

"She goes down with not a bang, but a whimper," Buffy grumped.

"She goes down all right."

"You are not funny."

"Oi, that's not nice." He ran a hand through her hair, plucking away bits of grass and fragments of broken leaves. "And here I was gonna suggest we go home, wash up, get you nice and cozy. Then see about workin' out some of these knots." Spike pressed down on the juncture of her arm and shoulder, a place that was routinely sore and *not* because of the way she dropped said shoulder when she was fighting, thank you

very much. "But if you're not gonna be nice, pet, then no reason for me to be naughty."

Buffy rested her brow against his chest, her voice muffled in the leather of his duster. "That makes the kind of sense that doesn't."

Spike laughed again, the sound warm and full of love. A good sound. The best sound, even if her head was throbby and she wanted to pretend a minute longer to be irritated with him. Pretend, because that was all it was, and he knew that. He slid a hand down until their fingers were entangled. "Come on. We—"

But he didn't finish the thought. It broke off, dangled against the resetting quiet around them, night sounds once more blooming in place of conversation or fighting or anything in between. Buffy wrinkled her nose and looked up, caught him staring at something over her shoulder. There was nothing creaturey back there—her mind was clear enough to tell her as much—but for whatever reason, Spike had been knocked off course.

"What?" Buffy asked, turning. Then she saw it too. Saw it and realized for the first time just exactly what path they had taken. Wondering how she'd missed it. How it was even possible to have missed it for either of them.

Standing not five feet away was a familiar headstone, one memorializing a girl who was no longer buried beneath it. The earth above looked normal enough, green and lumpy and undisturbed, but it hadn't always been like this. Like any number of other graves in this cemetery—or any of the cemeteries across Sunnydale—the person who had been lain to rest hadn't stayed that way. And why had anyone expected differently? Half-dead creatures crawling for freedom here was the norm. That was certainly what she'd been once upon a time. Somewhere between life and death, closer to one but wishing for the other.

She remembered staring at this stone the night she'd climbed free. How it had reflected back at her, a nightmare that wasn't a nightmare at all.

"Oh," she said at length, feeling winded all over again. "Look at that."

"Buffy." The tease had abandoned his voice. When she met his gaze, she saw it was just him now, him and her. "You all right, love?"

Was she all right? Buffy pressed her lips together, glanced over her shoulder again. Feet from her grave, standing at the end of a day that hadn't been good but hadn't been truly bad either. Just a regular day, the highs great and the lows shitty but all of it packaged together in something that had somehow become hers. An existence she'd carved for herself out of this world she had died to protect and might live to do the same. There was a bath waiting for her at home. A bath and a back massage and, if she was lucky, some truly spectacular sex with the man she loved. And when tomorrow came, she would do it again. Perhaps not exactly, except the good parts. The good parts she would do exactly.

If that wasn't all right, Buffy thought as she turned away from her grave, then she didn't know what was.

"Yeah," she said, looking at Spike again, pulled into eyes that always saw her clearly. And always reflected love. "Never been better."

And she smiled because it was the truth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A love letter to my betas: Niamh, Kimmie Winchester, and bewildered

All told, this story features some of the most difficult writing I've ever done, and I couldn't have done it without my betas. I gave them all ample warning about what was coming so they could opt to skip out if this would be too triggering. Two of them have struggled with depression of this magnitude and I worried it might be too much for them to read. At the same time, though, their input was invaluable because they, more than anyone else, would be able to tell me if I was handling it correctly. Mental health issues, sensitivity, and awareness are hugely important to me. I've been outspoken about my struggles with OCD for years (OCD being the real, debilitating anxiety, not the funny/quirky shit you saw on Monk). In many ways, I can relate to Buffy as she is right now. I have been depressed—severely depressed, but I've never been Buffy's level of depressed, though, nor have I contemplated the things she contemplated in this chapter. Getting it right, being true to her, to depression, and to that sense of utter hopelessness was crucial. Still, my concern was foremost my betas' mental wellbeing. No fic is worth putting yourself through mental stress or anguish.

Suffice to say, that my betas dismissed the offers to skip the harder

chapters means the world to me. That they brought their own experiences to this chapter to help me through to the end is a debt I can never repay. I am so grateful to them. They are superheroes. So thank you, ladies, for your emotional labor.

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